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THE WORKS OF

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME III.

UNCLE JOHN

Caldwell

UNCLE JOHN

A NOVEL

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

E. CALDWELL AND H. M. BROCK

LONDON

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UNCLE JOHN

UNCLE JOHN

Me forthinketh, said King Pellinore, this shall betide, but God may well foredoe destiny.—*Morte d'Arthur.*

CHAPTER I

THE LETTER-BOX

OF all taxes levied on friendship few are so galling as the *corvée* that compels a guest to inspect and admire the house in which he is entertained. To follow your host, with wet feet, and hands in pockets, round the stables, the kennel, the farm, and, worse still, the kitchen-garden, may well create a doubt that you had better have stayed away; but this becomes a certainty when, in dismal attics and cheerless corridors, you stumble against a coal-box or are brought up with your head in a housemaid's closet. I will not ask my reader, therefore, to accompany me beyond the hall of a comfortable country-house in one of the midland counties; a hall well-warmed and ventilated, where a good fire burns opposite the glass door that looks out upon the lawn. It seems to blaze the more cheerfully that a hard frost has bound the whole country in misery and iron. The leafless hedges

stand stiff and bristling with frozen rime, the bare trees in the park are clearly cut against a dull grey sky, the very grass crackles under the postman's foot, and that functionary would seem to be the only moving creature in the parish but for an inquisitive robin, in a bright red waistcoat, with his head on one side, who hops and jerks restlessly across the gravel in front of the hall-door.

In consequence of the postman's arrival, a well-dressed free-and-easy butler emerges from certain back-passages and corridors, bringing a draught of cold air with him, and proceeds to unlock the letter-box that stands in a remote corner on one of the hall-tables. As he tumbles out the contents he scrutinises their addresses with considerable attention. And here I may observe that a shrewd upper servant, who superintends the correspondence of a family, even when he confines himself to the outside of the many missives that pass through his hands, must, if, to use his own language, he "puts that and that together," know a great deal more than we give him credit for.

On the present occasion we will take upon ourselves the fulfilment of a task for which the butler has little leisure, the postman less inclination; and, mastering the contents of these epistles, begin with No. I., addressed in a running, lady-like, not very legible hand,

To the Hon. Mrs. Pike, South Kensington,
London, S.W.

[No date.]

My Dearest Letty,—Not a word till I have sent a thousand kisses to Baby. He is the greatest

darling in Europe, and I am sure he knew me when I wished him good-bye in your boudoir the day I left London. I have not forgotten my promise to write and tell you "all how and about it," as my maid says when she begins a full, *un*true, and particular account of that general rumpus among the servants which seems to prevail regularly once a month. In the first place, the old house is as nice as ever, the country very much the reverse. The fields at this time of year seem impracticable without stilts, the lanes are knee-deep in mud, one meets cattle at all sorts of unexpected turns, and I think I am equally frightened whether they have horns or not. The labourers touch their hats and grin, their wives make curtseys down to the ground. Every woman carries a basket; and oh! they are so dirty! Then the boys have sheep-dogs, and talk to them in such an extraordinary language; but the creatures seem to understand, nevertheless. The cottages and children are pretty. Perhaps it may be more tolerable in summer. Now for our party; small and select, just what *you* like. Uncle John is, as he always was and always will be, a *dear* old dear; but his whiskers are whiter than when I saw him last, and he seems to have grown shorter. Between ourselves, Letty (*mind!*), I cannot help fancying that Aunt Emily is wearing him out. He is as good-tempered as ever, and sometimes full of fun, but I don't suppose it can be natural for a man to be so patient under contradiction, however well he may have been broken in; and I think if he could go away somewhere, *by himself*, for a month or two, it would do him a world of good. You know him thoroughly, and love him dearly, so I need say no more, but pass on to his guests, taking them as they go in to dinner, the county people first. Uncle gives his arm to a Mrs. Foster

always; I can't think why. She has no particular rank, but is wife of the Master of the Hounds; perhaps that counts for something down here. I won't describe her, dear, I'll only describe her head. An *enormous* chignon, of so many shades that it is almost tartan, put on very high up, with odds and ends stuck all over it, like the toys on a twelfth-cake; a bunch of artificial *vegetables*, not flowers, drooping on one side; earrings like the things they hang on a chandelier; and—spectacles! How Mr. Foster *could!* for really *he* is rather nice; oldish, and ridiculous about his hunting, but good-natured and amusing, with a frank courtesy about him, that I think men of all ranks acquire who live a great deal out of doors. He is wretched just now, because it is freezing hard and they can't hunt. I am sure I don't know why; any amount of cold must be preferable to the slush we have all been wading about in ever since I came down. He is quite the nicest of the gentlemen, for the young ones are rather detestable. A curate from the other side of the county, who is a wonderful cricketer, I believe, and takes long walks by himself. They say he preaches beautifully, and next Sunday we shall have an opportunity of judging; as yet I have not heard him open his lips. Also two officers from some cavalry regiment, whose figures, clothes, and voices are so ridiculously alike, and their faces so devoid of all expression, that if the best-looking of the pair had not a trifling squint, it would be impossible to know one from the other. Should the ice bear to-morrow, they propose teaching me to skate—either or both, I can't tell which. But for poor Mr. Foster and his hunting, I hope it may; and only wish you were here to enjoy the fun, as they don't the least know our *form*, to use their

own expression, and that you and I can hold our own on the Round Pond with the best performers who ever danced a minuet on steel. I have not made up my mind whether to pretend I am quite a beginner, or to astonish their weak minds by dashing out at once with a figure of 8, on the outside edge, backwards.

My dear, I am coming to the end of my paper. I shall have no space left to describe the rest of the ladies, two married and one single, all plain, nor a delightful Eton boy, who goes back, I am sorry to say, to-morrow; nor to give half the messages I should like to your dear General, my partner at whist, my adversary at bézique; the only antagonist who never made me angry, and my pattern, next to Baby, for everything that is manly and adorable; but with many kisses must remain, dearest, darling Letty,—Ever your loving,

ANNIE DENNISON.

P.S.—I forgot to say we expect a Mr. Mortimer to-day, who has been a great traveller; and a clerk from the Foreign Office, whose name I have not yet made out. Freezing hard; I think the ice *will* bear to-morrow.

No. II.

To Mr. JOSIAS POTTER, The Kennels, Cublington.

PLUMPTON PRIORS, *Jan. 12th.*

POTTER,—As there appears but little chance of the weather changing, you had better not send out the appointments for next week. If there is no prospect of improvement, I shall hunt the first open day at the Kennels, and we can give the Blaston-

bury Woods a good drilling with a strong pack of hounds. I have been thinking over Woldsman's doings on Saturday, and have come to the conclusion we must draft him. Wildboy too is, I fear, a conceited hound. It is a pity, for I never saw two sightlier ones on the flags. I was much pleased with Frantic and Fearless. They puzzled it out through Martin's sheep at the back of Oldborough, and were never once off the line all the way to the Dales. They promise to be as good as old Frolic herself. You had better see Mr. Boulter at once about the meal, and tell Frank to go over with the cart to Sludgeley. Martin's white horse will not keep much longer.

I have a letter from the new man at Spinnithorne complaining of the damage done to his young wheat on Thursday, and another from old Miss Lovelace about her poultry. The usual story: a fox has taken nine Dorking hens, a litter of pigs, and a peacock! As soon as the hacks are roughed, you can go over and talk to the Spinnithorne man, whose name I forget. If he is obstinate, tell him the damage, should there be any, shall be made good when harvest comes round. Miss Lovelace will be more difficult to manage; but you might admire the silk dress I gave her last year, and hint at another, if she seems very obstinate indeed. When you are in that neighbourhood, ride round by the Lodges and see Colonel Jones's keeper; the people from Upper Preston are continually rabbiting in Preston Dene, and it is his business to keep them out. Mr. Miles tells me they found a trap that would have held a bullock in Thorpe Netherwood yesterday. I have written to Sir James on the subject; but if you see the steward, it would be well to mention it. He is a good friend to

hunting and a most respectable man. I cannot think of anything more just now, except that you should call on the bailiff at Kingsacre and find out how many puppies they will walk for us. He promised me two couple at least. We shall want another cow in less than a fortnight, but that may stand over till Middleton Fair. I shall be home the day after to-morrow, when I can give any further directions you require, and remain,—Your friend,

JOHN FOSTER.

No. III.

To the Honourable Mrs. PIKE, South Kensington, London, S.W.

PLUMPTON PRIORS, *Jan. 12th*, 18—.

DEAR MRS. PIKE,—My husband desires me to write and say that it would give us much pleasure if General Pike and yourself would come here next week, from the 17th to the 22nd, to meet a small party of friends and neighbours. There is a mid-day train from London that reaches Sludgeley Station, only a mile and a half from our gate, at 4.50. You must be sure to change at Muddleford, and if the down express is late you may have to wait there; but this is better than coming by the new line and posting from Canonsbury. We can send the brougham for yourselves and the omnibus for servants and luggage. Our niece, Miss Dennison, who is staying with us, tells me that she believes I shall be fortunate enough to find you both disengaged; and hoping for an early reply (in the affirmative), I remain,—Yours very sincerely,

EMILY DENNISON.

UNCLE JOHN

No. IV.

To Augustus Neville, Esq., Middlemarsh, Huntingdon.

Jan. 11th or 13th.

My Dear Podge,—You swore you would write once a week all the holidays through, and so did I; but you haven't, and I haven't. Never mind. Better late than never: old proverb—neither Solomon's nor Tupper's. I must tip you a line from here because I go home to-morrow, and there is very little time for writing or anything else in our diggings at this season, when the governor likes to have a houseful. He is going to finish off the pheasants next week, and I made him *almost* promise that I might shoot with the others. I *have* got a gun, a very good one. If it wasn't for that I should be quite sorry to leave this place. It is very jolly, particularly in the evenings; for old Dennison, who is no end of a trump, always has the billiard-room lit up after dinner; so if you don't want to be bothered with the ladies, you needn't go to them at all.

I generally play with Miss Dennison; such a stunning girl—a good deal older than me, of course—but I can give her ten in a hundred up; and I play much better on this table than I did that day at your governor's in London. She sings, too, no end, the jolliest songs, that make a fellow feel quite in the dumps, but always English. She has a very fine voice though, and Lexley, a tall chap, who is staying here, a curate, with black whiskers, is rather spoony on her. He was not an Eton fellow, but played two years ago at Lord's in the Marylebone eleven. I don't think he likes us to be so much in

the billiard-room, but he is an awful muff with a cue. I have got such a good hunter this Christmas; not a pony, but quite fifteen hands. Can't he just jump! Only he pulls rather hard; but I don't mind that; and I am to have top-boots next year. I suppose I shan't see you now till next half, though my governor told me to ask you to come to us, if you could, on your way back to Eton. I wish you would. I want to show you the terrier pups and Bellerophon—that's my new horse. When he gets quieter I will give you a mount on him. Won't it be jolly if we travel together? Good-bye.—Yours very sincerely, H. G. F. PERIGORD
(commonly called the Pieman).

No. V.

To HORACE MAXWELL, Esq., Foreign Office, Whitehall, S.W.

PLUMPTON PRIORS, *Jan. 12th.*

MY DEAR HORACE,—You have delayed your visit here so long that I fear I shall be gone before you arrive. I take the duty next Sunday, but must return home early Monday morning. I have no idea what happens to foreign treaties and ambassadors' notes when you neglect them, but a parish gets sadly out of order if it is left to itself for ten days. I have still a hope that you may come to-morrow, particularly as you will receive another reminder from our excellent host, who said at breakfast he had written a strong letter this morning, and I wish it may be possible for you to give me a couple of days at least before you return. I need not say what a hearty welcome would await you, though, alas! I

have only bachelor accommodation to offer. There are many temptations to visit this most agreeable house, and many more to remain in it when you come. Mr. Dennison himself is my ideal of a country gentleman, and his wife, though not so taking at first sight, improves on acquaintance.

There is no lack of amusement; hunting and shooting, for those who like such sports, beautiful walks, even at this time of year, out of doors, and an excellent billiard-table within. One of the young ladies, a Miss Dennison, plays remarkably well, and has already taken the conceit out of an Eton boy who is spending part of his holidays here, and who thinks no small beer of himself, as we used to say at Rugby. I am sure the Etonians are more "cheeky," to use another slang expression, than our *condiscipuli*; still, the school turns out some excellent classics, and the Shooting Fields make good cricketers, no doubt. This youth is a manly fellow enough, but I should imagine rather a dunce at his books. Miss Dennison, who is very clever, quizzes him unmercifully, but the young cub has not an atom of shyness, and, indeed, is usually ready with a reply. It is very difficult to describe a lady or a landscape, so much in both depends on lights and colouring; moreover, it would be a waste of time to detail Miss Dennison's personal attractions, as you will be able to judge for yourself when you arrive. I shall be much disappointed if you do not admire her. There is a peculiar depth and softness in her eyes when she turns them on you that almost makes one a believer in mesmerism, and with a delicate fair face and masses of rich brown hair, that would be black but for a tinge of gold, she brings forcibly before me my ideal of female loveliness. You need not laugh. It is only a picture I saw the year

before last at Vienna. Her figure, too, and all her movements, are full of grace and dignity. To see her walk across the room is to see—no! I will not descend into descriptions that could never convey the faintest notion of their subject. Rather will I quote the terse and glowing phrases in which Captains Nokes and Stokes, the great twin brethren of the —th Dragoons, expressed their approval only this morning in the conservatory.

Quoth Stokes to Nokes, sucking viciously at a refractory cigar, "Good looks, good temper, good manners—what would you have more? and the sweetest goer I've seen over rough and smooth since Witch of Erin won the Conynghame Cup."

Answered Nokes to Stokes, "I'm not a buyer, old fellow, more's the pity! or she'd suit me down to the ground."

Yet these men are not entirely without cultivation and refinement. One of them sketches admirably in water-colours, and, passing through the library, I came upon the other reading Tasso in the original, apparently with the greatest zest. Why should they talk in such terms of a lady to whom they hourly offer a perfectly chivalrous and unselfish politeness? I like them both, nevertheless. We took a long walk together yesterday that reminded me of old University days. Of course I love and revere my own profession above all others; but were I not a parson, my dear Horace, I trust there is no harm in confessing that I should like to have been a soldier. Do not think for a moment I am discontented with my lot; the obscurest country curate has a field for the exercise of all the best and noblest qualities of manhood. Were my powers increased a hundredfold, they would still fall far short of my requirements. I may have my wishes, who has

not? The *angulus ille* with me would probably be such preferment as should enable me to make for myself a home. Have I seen one whom I should like to install as its mistress? Again, who knows? Probably, the real mistress, when she does come, will be very different from the imaginary one.

And now I have let this letter run to an unconscionable length, yet I feel as if I had not said half I wish. I will inflict on you the balance when we meet, and in the meantime remain as ever,—Yours most truly, ALGERNON LEXLEY.

No. VI.

To Major-General J. PIKE, etc., South Kensington, London, S.W.

PLUMPTON PRIORS, *Jan. 12th.*

MY DEAR JACOB,—My wife has written to yours by to-day's post, with a *formal* invitation to you both. I write to *you*, as usual, because I want you to do something for me. In the first place, of course you must come here. That question can admit neither of doubt nor argument. If you have other engagements, throw them over; if pleasures, postpone; if duties, neglect them: here you are bound to be on the 17th at latest. I have kept Marbury Hill on purpose, and my keeper says he has twice as many pheasants in the lower wood as when we shot it last year. That ought to be good enough. If you can hold as straight as you did then, I can promise you a hundred to your own gun. I have been out very little, the incurable complaint of *anno domini* is beginning to tell, and though I have few bodily ailments, and am still pretty strong and active, that

moral energy, which is the backbone of all exertion, fails day by day.

That will never be the case with *you*. They say, though I don't believe it, a man must die either of *syncope* or *asphyxia*—by fainting or suffocation. In the same way, age as it steals on makes us year by year more fussy or more torpid. How much better to be the stream that keeps itself pure by ceaselessly dashing and boiling against a rock, than the green slimy pond, never ruffled by a breath, but stagnating calmly and helplessly into mud! You are the youngest of all our contemporaries. Long may you remain so!

And yet, my dear old friend, it does not seem so many years ago (can it be more than fifty?) since we won the Double Sculling Sweepstakes, amidst the shouts of my tutor's levy, at the Brocas Clump. I remember, and so do you, as if it had happened yesterday, how we pounded a Leicestershire field at the second fence from the Coplow; and yet I doubt if one of those we left behind us is alive now. "Where is the life that late I led?" and where, oh! where are the loves we loved, the sums we squandered, the horses we tired, and the scores of good fellows we have seen out?

"There's many a lad I loved is dead,
And many a lass grown old,
And while the lesson strikes my head
My weary heart grows cold.

But wine awhile staves off despair
Nor lets a thought remain;
And that I think's a reason fair
To fill my glass again."

If we live to a hundred, should we ever forget how poor Frank used to troll out Morris's famous drinking song after mess? Alas! if he could have

resisted the filling (and emptying) of his own glass so persistently, we should have had him with us still.

I sometimes wished that I had remained in the service, as you did, and married later in life. But I suppose these things are arranged for us, and that every station has its drawbacks—every horse is handicapped to carry a weight proportioned to his merits. As old Drill-Sergeant Macpherson used to say to the recruits, "It's not all beer and skittles when you've taken Her Majesty's shilling." And I fancy none of those over whom he domineered were inclined to dispute so obvious a truism.

Now to detail the commissions I want executed in London. In the first place, will you go to Lincoln's Inn, any day this week, and jog everybody's memory concerning our trustee business? They seem to have forgotten that another quarter's interest will be due on the 25th. Also look in at Meerschaum's and try if you can get me some more of those large cigars we liked in Scotland. I will take any number of boxes—say a dozen—if they are the right sort; but I will not have short ones. I smoke very little, as you know, but like that little long.

You are sure to be at Tattersall's, so it will be no trouble to look at Mountjoy's horses. He has a chestnut that I am told would carry me. You know exactly what I want—something very perfect, with good manners and easy to ride; a rough-actioned horse tires me to death. He *must* be a fine jumper, as I like occasionally to mount a friend, and do not wish him to be brought home with a broken neck—at least, as old Bitterly said, "not to *my* house." A chestnut horse they call Magnate bears the character of an excellent hunter. I will

ask you to have him out and look him well over; if you like his make and shape, you can bid for him up to whatever you think he is worth. I should not mind three hundred; but you must be very careful, for when you come here you will have to ride him yourself.

I *know* you will like some claret I have just imported—Leoville '64—that will never get any better, and ought to be drunk out now. I *think*, too, you will like the little party staying here. Foster, I fear, will be gone; it is impossible to keep him more than two days from his hounds and his kennel. He makes a good master, and they have promised him a fair subscription. Potter does pretty well; he is an excellent servant, as I told them all they would find him—very patient in the field, very persevering, and lets his hounds alone; *but he does not get quick after his fox.* He never spoils a run and never makes one. I hunt so little now that, of course, I do not say much, but let them find out for themselves. You and I once thought every huntsman heaven-born, every fence practicable, every fox forward, and every hound right. I am not sure but that the enjoyment was greater in those days and the disappointment less.

Two pleasant dragoons of the old plunging pattern will remain till Returns, at the end of the month; they are good fellows enough—ride and shoot straight, make themselves extremely agreeable in the drawing-room, and entertain the profoundest respect for a major-general, which I hope you will do nothing to lessen. I expect Percy Mortimer to-day (from the Feejee Islands, I believe), and Horace Maxwell, from the Foreign Office, both very hungry for shooting. But never fear, not a stick shall be moved in Marbury till

you come. My niece Annie is here, and looking forward with great delight to your visit. I do not know on what principle she has appropriated you, but she always speaks of you as *her* General. Tell Mrs. Pike, with our kindest regards, that I will never forgive her if she does not bring *the* baby. There is a steady old rocking-horse still eating his head off under the stairs; I wish you would both stay till your son is old enough to ride him.

And now, my dear fellow, hoping to see you very soon,—I remain, yours as ever,

JOHN DENNISON.

No. VII.

To PERCY MORTIMER, Esq., Travellers' Club,
Pall Mall, London, S.W.

DEAR PERCY,—Not having seen or heard anything of you since we parted at Meerut, it *did* knock the wind out of me more than a bit to be told you were expected here this week. I can only hope the tip is a straight one. Come by all means if you *can*. The crib is craftily constructed, warm, water-tight, and with capacious cellarage. The bedrooms are easy of access, and the stairs made on purpose for after-dinner transport. The host is a trump, his cook so-so, but happily not too ambitious, and his liquors simply undeniable. A geological party, by name Lexley, who is getting his health with the rest of us, says it is a clay soil, with a sub-something of something else. Being a scientific cove, you shall argue the point with him when you come. To me it seems a surface of hard frost, with a swamp underneath, that will make the country unrideable when it thaws. In the mean-

time we are getting the skates ready, and I—even I—am coming out as "quite the ladies' man." I am to instruct Miss Dennison to-morrow in the graceful art, and can only hope she may take her croppers good-humouredly; for, as Pat Conolly used to say, "it's a mighty slippery hold ye get of the water when ye lay iron to ice." I shall do my best to keep her head straight, for you don't often meet them of that stamp. I'm a bad hand at describing a woman, but I'll be bound you haven't seen such a shaped one in all the Feejee Islands—and I give you the tattooing in. As to her being pretty and all that, it seems a matter of course; but she has a way of looking round at a poor fellow that makes him feel very glad he's a bachelor, yet very unwilling to remain one. Besides, from what Mrs. Dennison let out, she stands a good chance of having a pot of money when some old buffer dies, and he's past seventy now. Mrs. D. speaks by the card, I fancy; I know I shouldn't like to contradict her, and I am sure Dennison wouldn't. I should say she wants her head at her fences, and would make it very uncomfortable for him if he didn't mind what he was about. You must say "Yes" to *her* if you wish to sail on an even keel in this house; and Nokes, who isn't easily dashed, is obliged to behave quite prettily when she's got her eye on him. The niece seems the only person who isn't afraid of her, and I take it there's some hard hitting when they *do* have a turn-up. I don't understand women, having had very few dealings with them, for which I can't be too thankful; but it does seem to me that it takes a woman to tackle a woman, and you can't do better than let them fight it out. Miss Dennison looks a good-tempered girl too, but no doubt she has lots of pluck.

The shooting is fair, considering it's a hunting country, and Uncle John, as everybody calls our host, is very absolute on the subject of pheasants and foxes. He insists on having the latter, and when he has established that point, he says, he finds no difficulty about the other. It is the only subject on which I have yet heard him hold forth, for he is by no means a noisy one—would rather listen than speak and rather smoke than do either. Nokes, who is also a nailer at holding his tongue, swears by him, of course.

I meant to tell you about the country and the hunting, and all that, in case you should bring any horses; but in this weather shooting and skating irons are the necessary outfit. So I will only add, come if you can; if not, scrape me off one line to say where I am to draw for you in the village on my way to headquarters,—Yours very truly, ANTHONY STOKES.

To the HALL PORTER, Army and Navy Club, S.W.

Jan. 12th.

Please forward my letters. Address, "Plumpton Priors, Middleton Lacy," till further orders, instead of putting them in the fire as usual,

JAMES NOKES.

If people's characters are to be guessed from their handwriting, we may fairly suppose that their actual correspondence will afford us something more certain than mere surmise as to their habits, tempers, tastes, and dispositions. It is for this reason we have taken such unwarrantable liberties with the letter-box at Plumpton Priors.

CHAPTER II

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA

"THIS is one of our noblest institutions, Captain Nokes. I see you never miss it."

The Captain, gorgeously attired in yellow knickerbockers and purple hose, looked round to assure himself that Stokes was "in support." Encouraged by the presence of his comrade, similarly attired, he charged boldly up to the tea-table at which Miss Dennison had taken her seat.

"Nothing fetches a fellow like a cup of tea at this time of day, and a cigar afterwards." The Captain made a sudden pull-up, as if fearful of having committed a solecism, adding somewhat inconsequently, "Of course, if there are ladies and that, you know, one don't want to smoke, you know. A man can't have everything."

"You're quite a philosopher," replied Miss Dennison, with one of her brightest smiles, as she filled the cups. "But don't you always have tea in your barracks? I've heard a great deal about the evening meal. I know what 'telling off' is, and a kit, and a canteen. I'm rather a military person, you observe. I confess I *do* like soldiers, Captain Nokes!"

Honest Nokes, than whom no man alive had better nerve to confront a swift bowler or an awkward fence, looked seriously alarmed at this frank avowal, withdrawing his chair at least a couple

of feet from so dangerous a neighbourhood. His comrade, however, came opportunely to the rescue.

"*And* officers, Miss Dennison," added Stokes, with a glance from his best eye.

"Not unless they are generals," returned the young lady. "You see I've got a general of my own. A *major*-general. At least he belongs to a great friend of mine. He is to be here next week."

"Who's to be here next week?" demanded the sharp clear tones of Mrs. Dennison, from her knitting at the other end of the room. "What are you talking about, Annie?"

"Only the Pikes, aunt," replied Miss Dennison. "Uncle told me he had asked them himself."

"Your uncle did not ask them himself, at least to *my* knowledge," retorted the other severely. "I should think even Mr. Dennison would hardly ignore his wife so completely. I believe it is usual for such invitations to originate with the lady of the house, and I have not yet quite forfeited my claim to that position; so you shouldn't state a fact that you are unable to substantiate."

Annie looked uncomfortable, and one of those irksome silences supervened which everybody longs to break, while nobody can think of anything to say.

Mrs. Dennison had quick ears. Is it possible that she heard her husband hunting for a newspaper in the library adjoining, and spoke for his edification? Nokes coloured, Stokes winked, and Mr. Lexley, gulping a mouthful of hot tea, raised such a blister on his tongue as endangered the utility of that organ for next Sunday's sermon.

The entrance of young Perigord, bright and flushed from the crisp outward air, was felt to be a relief by all.

"You should have stayed till the moon rose,"

exclaimed the Etonian, throwing himself into a chair, and commencing a voracious attack on the bread-and-butter. "It's so jolly skating by moonlight. And I say, Miss Dennison, I did such a stunning spread-eagle after you left. Do you think if I was to practise every day, I should be good enough for the Round Pond? How I wish I wasn't going away to-morrow!"

"We shall miss you very much," answered the young lady. "You certainly keep us all alive down here. Pray do they teach skating at Eton, as they do swimming"—she paused for a moment—"and slang?"

The boy laughed. "You're always chaffing a fellow," was his reply, "but I like to be chaffed by *you*. (Yes, please, another cup and a slice of the cake.) I say, wasn't it fun to see you strike out from the chair, when Captain Nokes thought you meant going a header, and cut a figure of eight without lifting your heel from the ice? Why, you skate like —like—like bricks! I wish I was only half as steady, I'd belong to the Skating Club to-morrow."

"You astonished us all," said Mr. Lexley, putting down his empty cup. "I confess I was a little alarmed till I saw how thoroughly you were mistress of your feet. A slip on the ice is very dangerous, Miss Dennison," added the divine, with a soft look and something approaching to a blush.

She laughed merrily, while Stokes, remembering a French proverb bearing on the subject, refrained with difficulty from quoting it then and there.

"I have skated ever since I was ten," said Annie. "I liked it much better than my lessons, and learned the outside edge a good deal quicker than the 'History of England.' It's not half so difficult as people think!"

"Not for ladies," interposed Stokes, who felt he was coming out. "They do anything that requires 'knack' far better than men. Why, in a dozen lessons you may teach them to ride, and a dragoon can't learn under two years."

"It's only because they ride with longer reins than we do," observed Nokes.

"Don't you think they have more delicacy of touch, and therefore a lighter hand on the bridle?" asked Lexley.

"They've always got the easiest horse in the stable, and he's galloped before they get on, at least that is my sister's dodge," said young Perigord.

"We have more patience than you have, and more tact," replied Annie, with a mischievous glance; "qualities that subdue the inferior nature of the enemy."

"More obstinacy, you mean, and more cunning," was Aunt Emily's amendment, in her harshest tones, as she swept by the tea-table for some worsted. "The nobler the animal the easier it is to deceive. That's the secret of many a woman's success in matters of far greater importance than riding out of one field into another."

"Bravo, Mrs. D.!" exclaimed the incorrigible Etonian. "Five to two the best of *that* round, I think. Now *my* experience of women is that they do everything well they really like, and you can't tire them, even the delicate ones, with any amount of larks, in the shape of picnics, croquet, archery, tea-parties, meets of hounds, dancing, driving, and racketing about; but they're soon beat if you keep them at home, with the blinds down on a wet day."

A general laugh, aroused by the gravity with which this young gentleman expressed his sentiments, brought Mr. Dennison into the room, and a

place was immediately cleared for "Uncle John" at the tea-table, while his wife, looking austerely in the face of her youthful guest with the intention of administering some cutting rebuke on his flippancy, could not forbear a smile, as he winked solemnly, stuffed a large piece of cake in his mouth, and made a face like the clown in a pantomime—an accomplishment to which he devoted much of his leisure; and of which he was exceedingly proud.

Aunt Emily's ill-humour was not proof against the boy's exuberant spirits and intense enjoyment of life. Though he provoked her, worried her, broke through her rules and made light of her ordinances, she could not find it in her heart to reprove him as she felt he deserved, and for no member of the establishment, from its head downwards, was she half so forbearing as for this young scapegrace, who offended and amused her alternately every hour of the day.

Half a century ago, when John Dennison married her, Miss Emily Bland was as fresh, florid, and joyous-looking a girl as you would see at rural flower show or county races. She had plenty of partners, was never without an admirer to carry her shawl at a picnic, or string her bow at an archery meeting; but, somehow, partners and admirers did not get beyond waltzing and admiration; there was something feminine wanting in the straightforward, outspoken young lady, that a cleverer woman would have supplied with affectation. A far less amiable person might have been more beloved, if only for the little airs and graces that, however transparent, seem so appropriate to the softer sex. Nobody went home haunted by Emily Bland's eyes, with Emily Bland's voice ringing in his ears, and a flower from Emily Bland's bouquet to place in water on his dressing-table. There is a magic in most women, if

only exercised on the right subject, that seems quite independent of personal beauty or mental advantages; a charm that, in his mind who has come under the spell, connects her with all the comeliness, the excitement, and the interests of his life. He feels it in every kind of incongruous object and situation: in the violets that scent a woodland solitude, the patchouli that floats about a crowded opera-box, in the carol of a thrush on a spring morning, and the wail of a German waltz pealing at midnight, so sweet, so sad, so dear, because of the dancers who have departed and the days that are dead. In the glow of success, or the consciousness that he has borne him gallantly under defeat—in the strain of study and the pleasant merriment of relaxation—in the river, the sky, the woods, the downs, the sunlight on his brow and the free fresh turf beneath his feet—in the chime of bells, the voices of children, the loving welcome of his dog, the solemn glances of his favourite horse—in all and everything that constitute his identity, she has her share; so, finding she pervades his heart, he determines that, without her, existence is a blank, and takes her to himself, to discover, alas! too often, that, as a wife, she pervades it no more. Then come disappointment, discontent, recrimination, implied if not expressed. Human nature, in spite of experience, opining that life should be a path of flowers, feels ill-used. The man suspects he was a fool, the woman considers herself a martyr; by the time each is reconciled to the inevitable, years have passed away, and the moment has come to say "Good-bye." Perhaps not till lies between them the mysterious gulf, so narrow yet so impassable, that we call the grave, does either really know how loving was the other, and how beloved.

But Emily Bland had her romance too, a romance laid by in that secret storehouse where we put away our relics, and seem to hoard them the more religiously the more worn and useless they have become,

> "And the name of the isle is the Long Ago,
> And we bury our treasures there:"

but ever and anon the mists clear away from the island, and it stands out bright and shining, as if but an hour's sail from our barque, while the treasures flash and sparkle as of yore, because for one dreamy moment we can forget that

> "The brows of beauty and bosoms of snow
> Are heaps of dust, though we loved them so!"

and that the cold night of reality will fall on us darker and drearier for that delusive flash, half memory, half fancy, which, it may be, after all is a soul's foresight of the coming dawn that shall bring eternal day.

Emily Bland's romance, however, she kept to herself; and when John Dennison, young, amiable, full of life, spirits, and a certain genial softness of manner, attractive to men as to women, made his appearance at her father's house, and paid her the usual attentions of such guests to their hosts' daughter, she was not disinclined to hear his praises from maiden aunts and married chaperons, who held that the first qualification for a husband was a large landed estate, while, if that estate was unencumbered, and the man seemed good-natured, well-principled, and agreeable in manner, why so much the better.

All these requirements John Dennison amply fulfilled, and, if his old schoolfellows and brother officers were to be believed, a kinder heart, a more amiable disposition, were never lodged in twelve stone of symmetry and good looks. Many women

would have loved him dearly, perhaps many did. If not "boisterous as March," he was at least "fresh as May," and could identify himself with their interests, amusements, likes and dislikes, in a pleasant off-hand way, especially gratifying to that sex which pardons every offence more readily than neglect.

So he fell in love with Emily Bland as a young, good-humoured country squire, who has sold out of his regiment and is on the lookout for a wife, seems prone to fall in love—easily, painlessly, without those self-depreciating misgivings that render the cold fits of this intermittent malady so uncomfortable. His attachment neither kept him awake nor took away his appetite, did not even provoke him to write poetry, nor smoke inordinately, nor depart in any way from the usual habits of active indolence that a landed proprietor with a good agent almost necessarily adopts. If he rode a turn harder with the hounds I do not think it was owing to Miss Bland's presence in an open carriage at the meet; and when he got his famous score of three figures off the round-hand bowling, which was then a new art, I happen to know Miss Bland was on a visit to her aunt a hundred miles away, and did not even look in the county paper for its flowery account of the match.

So they were married; and it is only fair to say that it took them many weeks to discover they were utterly unsuited, had but few interests and no ideas in common. What may have been Miss Bland's ideal of a bridegroom this is not the place to inquire; but it was apparently something very different from kindly, clear-faced, open-hearted John Dennison. She took no pains to conceal from him the unflattering opinions she held of his intellect, his prowess,

even his personal good looks, and he accepted the situation with a resigned philosophy creditable to so young a man, for whom many women would have liked to throw the fly and set the trimmer, undeterred by considerations of property or propriety, as is often the case with pretty anglers, who dearly love to inveigle their fish from other people's waters.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred are soured by such disappointments; but the exception emerges from his ordeal mellowed, softened, improved, like a cask of Madeira that has doubled the Cape. Uncle John carried his burden, whatever it was, without complaint, and indeed seemed mildly cheerful under its weight, even at an age when it began to curve the falling shoulders and press the shrinking stature down towards the earth.

He looked more than his years now, taking his seat at the tea-table, with bent form and stiffened gestures; but the light of youth still kindled in his eye, and a smile joyous as that of the boy whom he addressed was on his face while he pressed the Etonian to remain over the morrow for one more day's practice at the art of which he seemed so enthusiastic a votary.

"I'll send you to the station to catch the early train next morning, and you'll be home for luncheon by three o'clock at the latest. I suppose, though, you can't get up. You young ones like bed, and I'm not sure you're wrong. It's the best place in this cold weather."

Young Perigord scouted the accusation. "Bed, Mr. Dennison? I should never go to bed at all, if I had my way. I should like to hunt or skate all day, and sit up all night playing billiards and smoking. Bed is only fit for old women."

"And old men," added his host. "Your plan of

life sounds extremely useful. Unfortunately it would not last very long. No—no, my boy, hunting and skating as much as you like, but never stay up after twelve, except at a ball. Wherever the small hours are without the presence of ladies, there is mischief going on. Don't you agree with me, Annie?"

"No, I don't," said Annie; "that's the time we do a good deal of ours. But Mr. Perigord has a large shooting-party to entertain. We cannot hope he will sacrifice all his smart friends to *us*."

"It's not that!" exclaimed the boy eagerly. "But papa expects me, you know. And I shouldn't like to disappoint him, you know, though of course I'd much rather stay here."

"That's right, my lad," said Uncle John. "I'll order the dogcart to be ready at your own time to-morrow. Better have an hour or two on the ice before you go, and tell your father from me, as he won't come and stay here himself, he must let you pay us a longer visit next year."

"And I shall see you in London," exclaimed the young gentleman, addressing Annie with much *empressement*. "I'm safe to be in town, you know, for the Easter holidays and the Public School matches."

"You'll have forgotten me by Easter," answered Miss Dennison, laughing. "Besides, we're not likely to meet. I'm a very quiet person, and don't go to half a dozen balls in a season."

"Balls!" repeated the youth, with profound contempt. "You don't suppose I'd be seen at a ball? No—no. I'd rather go in for dinners and all that, only people don't ask a fellow about much till he's got whiskers. I daresay mine will be quite out of the common, but there's no appearance of them yet."

"If you sit there talking nonsense you'll be late

again, Annie, as you were last night," interposed the warning voice of Mrs. Dennison. "You've barely three-quarters of an hour to dress now."

"That clock gallops, aunt," replied the young lady, with a glance at the chimney-piece. "Still, great results cannot be attained without pains and patience. Tell me who is coming, and I shall regulate my get-up accordingly."

Mrs. Dennison looked black, while Uncle John answered with a laugh—

"London dandies, Annie—no use wasting too much finery on *them*. They're used to it, and would be more impressed with simplicity, and—what d'ye call it?—book-muslin."

"Ah! I know the London dandies well enough, and, for the matter of that, all dandies are much the same," replied Annie; whereat Mr. Lexley, who was *not* a dandy, looked pleased. "But I mean who else is there? Country neighbours, or anything of that kind?"

"Two officers from the Fort," said her uncle.

"Infantry officers?" demanded Stokes and Nokes in a breath.

"They *are* and they are *not*," replied Mr. Dennison. "Having a fort in our neighbourhood, commanded on all sides by wooded heights, we have also a battery. Now, you cannot call the gunners infantry officers, because they are liable to be mounted at any time, which is a great advantage if they want to run away."

"They're not cavalry," said Nokes.

"All officers are dandies," observed Miss Annie. "It's my great objection to the service."

Nokes looked helplessly at his comrade, who felt called upon to take up the glove thus thrown down.

"Don't say so, Miss Dennison," he expostulated.

"Didn't the Duke of Wellington declare the dandies made his best soldiers? And what was it Dr. Johnson or somebody said about fellows being slovens and beasts if they weren't dandies? Fancy being a sloven, Miss Dennison! Why it's worse than being a beast!"

"The greatest swell I ever saw," interposed young Perigord, "was a troop sergeant-major of heavy dragoons. Neither of *you* could hold a candle to him for manners, moustaches, and general swagger. Besides, he was a very handsome fellow too."

"Which you mean to imply we are *not*?" laughed Stokes. "All the more reason for availing ourselves of the decorative art. Miss Dennison, though you don't require any such assistance, I see you are going to refit. Let me light you a candle."

On reflection half an hour afterwards, while tying his white neckcloth, Stokes thought he had worded his little compliment rather neatly, though he feared it was lost on its object, who took her candle as usual from Mr. Lexley, and followed Aunt Emily demurely upstairs, under the portraits of many various coloured Dennisons, from the last squire in scarlet coat and hunting-cap to the Queen Elizabeth's Dennison, of whom the family were proud, in peaked beard and trunk hose.

There is a great deal in habit. Lexley had acquired a habit of lighting Miss Dennison's candle, offering her wine-and-water at night, which she invariably refused, and shaking hands with her when he came down to breakfast, even if he did not drop into the vacant place at her side. To have missed any one of these observances would already have been felt as a slight contrariety in the day's pleasure; and although he would not have admitted

that her presence affected his enjoyment of his visit one way or the other, he knew he had never spent so happy a time at the Priors before. There are two periods of life when the companionship of an agreeable and pretty woman seems insensibly but very pleasantly to enhance a man's daily comfort and well-being: before he has begun and after he has left off caring too much. In the first case, like a recruit learning the use of his new weapons, he acquires a daily increase of self-confidence and self-respect; in the second, like a veteran at a review, he scans with critical eye and profound respect for his own judgment the display prepared for his gratification, admiring it none the less that for him the cartridges are now blank, and the manœuvres, however skilful, but the marches and counter-marches of a sham fight.

Algernon Lexley had never yet been in action; was indeed, in this respect, a fine young recruit, perfectly raw and undrilled. In the society of Miss Dennison he felt elevated, invigorated, and, as he himself thought, humanised. He began to wish his strong sinewy hands were whiter, and to be critical as to the shape of his boots.

To-night, dressing for dinner, none the less carefully that the grating of wheels, ringing of bells, and bumping of boxes along the passage portended a new arrival, he was unusually careful in tying his white neckcloth, and hunted for a pin wherewith to fasten on his breast the flower he would be sure to find laid out for him on a table at the drawing-room door.

When the heathens offered a calf to Jupiter, I fancy they always dressed it up in garlands, and no doubt the poor thing, gratified with its decorations, nibbled at the blossoms quite contentedly, unconscious it was so soon to be made veal.

CHAPTER III

WINDOW UP OR DOWN?

A MAN may have travelled all over the world, including the Feejee Islands, yet find himself somewhat confused on the platform of one of our great railway stations, when a through train is starting for the other end of the kingdom. His luggage has disappeared on the shoulders of different porters in different directions, a barrowful of portmanteaus threatens his toes, a woman doubtfully sober, with a baby undoubtedly sick, offends his eye, and a shrill-voiced boy proclaiming the daily papers splits the drum of his ear. He has put his silver into the wrong pocket, probably without counting his change, and must undo all his wraps to get at the ticket it is necessary for an official to inspect. He wants to smoke, though *not* in a smoking compartment, and finds every carriage full, but one which is placarded "Engaged," while, lest force of character and clearness of intellect should rise superior to and dominate these reverses, a fiend in velveteen completes his discomfiture by ringing a hand-bell, which deafens, stupefies, and reduces the victim to utter idiotcy and prostration.

Even Percy Mortimer and Horace Maxwell, the one a traveller from China to Peru, the other a citizen of the world, who knew his London from Dan to Beersheba, from the Agricultural Hall,

Islington, let us say, to the Consumptive Hospital, Brompton, found themselves separated at the moment of entering the train that was about to take them down to Plumpton Priors, and defeated in their intention of travelling together that they might smoke in silence, and so thoroughly enjoy each other's conversation and society. That Maxwell acted quite loyally by his friend I am not prepared to assert. While Mortimer, with the assistance of an invaluable servant, who never listened, never spoke, and never forgot, was establishing himself, his wraps, his travelling-bag, his luncheon-basket, his books, his pamphlets, and his newspapers, in the back seat of a first-class carriage, Horace, who had been buying *Punch* at the bookstall, spied an attractive face, and a remarkably well-gloved hand, belonging to a solitary lady in an adjoining compartment, and, either by good luck or skilful play, timed his departure so cleverly that had the guard not bundled him unhesitatingly into the seat opposite, he must have been left behind on the platform, which perhaps was no more than he deserved.

In common with many other young men of like education and habits, he could not resist the temptation of a pretty face accidentally encountered in railway, steamboat, exhibition, theatre, or other public place, where people are thrown on their own resources for an introduction. The uncertainty as to how they may be received seems to give a zest to the cautious advances such men delight in making under such circumstances, and they find no doubt a spice of romance in their ignorance of the lady's antecedents, in the extreme improbability of meeting her again, and in the insane probability that here, at last, has been struck by blindest chance the vein of

gold that shall adorn and enrich a lifetime. In spite of its folly and its danger, a leap in the dark has always proved fascinating to human nature, and, taken hand in hand with a pretty woman, men seldom pause to ask themselves what there is on the other side.

But *was* she a pretty woman? Maxwell scrutinising her from behind his *Punch* by instalments, as it were and without staring, considered the question more than once before he decided in the affirmative.

She was *not* young, that was clear, not what *he* called young, in the flower and prime of manhood. She might have been five-and-twenty, or five-and-thirty — the brightness of her hair, eyes, and complexion denoted the earlier age, while there was something of repose, even dignity, in her bearing and gestures, seldom acquired by women till they have lost the fresher charms of youth. There is no mistaking the cut flowers of the drawing-room for their ungathered sisters in the garden. Her right hand was ungloved, and on its fourth finger were massed three or four hoop rings, very suggestive of wedding presents.

"Yes," thought Horace, "that's a married woman's hand, and a very pretty hand it is. Just what I like: white, well-shaped, rather strong, and not too small. I wish she'd take off her *other* glove, and I should know for certain; though, after all, what *can* it matter to *me*?"

Then he tried to fix his attention on *Punch*, and found it was no use, so resumed the scrutiny of his *vis-á-vis*.

She was tall, that he inferred from the graceful indolence of her attitude as she leaned back in the low, deep-cushioned seat; tall, and, unless he was much deceived by a sealskin jacket, formed rather

in the mould of Juno than Hebe. Her complexion was pale, but with the pallor of a delicate skin, not a languid circulation; and her clear-cut features, like those we see on a cameo, were almost stern in their regularity. It was a face that looked as if it could be very immovable, very pitiless, yet that it would be well worth while to rouse into expression should the statue wake up to life. The hair, of a golden brown, was pulled tightly back in the severest style of modern fashion, a style only becoming when it grows, as it did here, exactly where it ought on the forehead and temples. Her ears were perfect, in colour and shape like little shells, and undisfigured by earrings.

As they came to the first tunnel Maxwell decided that, with eyebrows and eyelashes a shade darker, this would be one of the best-looking women he ever saw in his life.

What a long tunnel it was! Emerging into day, he caught her eye in the act of scanning her fellow-traveller by lamplight. This emboldened him to speak; but behold! they were once more in darkness; and he was glad of it, for Horace, usually ready enough with his tongue, found he had nothing to say.

At last they came out into the open country, flying through the green pastures that skirt London, at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

She was sitting with her back to the engine, but the old excuse served for a beginning, and he asked her if she would like the window up or down?

In the few words with which she answered he detected a certain tone used in that artificial state of society which he called "the world."

She spoke graciously enough, but with a perfect self-possession that told him he was in the

presence of an equal, who would accept politeness as her due, without being the least flurried or flattered by his attentions.

Horace Maxwell could think of nothing better to say than that "it was very cold, though it looked like a thaw; but nothing *was* so cold as a thaw."

"Colder than a frost?" she asked with a smile; and added, "I am the worst possible judge of weather; but I always fancy London is warmer than anywhere else."

"Do you like London?" said Horace, who had been looking in vain for a name on her dressing-case, a monogram on her travelling-bag, anything to identify his new acquaintance, and now thought he saw his way to a discovery. "People say it's the best place to live in. Perhaps you don't think so? Perhaps you don't live there?"

She smiled again, but it was rather a bitter smile.

"I don't *live* anywhere," she answered. "I vegetate, but, unlike most vegetables, I am not at all susceptible to weather, and, indeed, I care little about places. It's the same thing over and over again, whether you're in London or Paris, or Kamschatka or Japan."

"And you've been to them all?" said Maxwell in an accent of incredulity. "Why, you must have travelled round the world!"

"Not exactly," she answered; "but though it sounds strange, I assure you I could find my way about St. Petersburg as easily as the Regent's Park, which rather reminds me of it; and I don't know that I should be quite *désorientée* if you dropped me in the main street of Jeddo."

At the Foreign Office, it is to be presumed, the

names at least of these places are known, and their respective distances from the meridian of Greenwich.

"You take my breath away!" said Maxwell. "You seem to have been everywhere. You must be very fond of travelling."

"On the contrary, I hate it. I never wish to leave England again, and I never will."

While she spoke the delicate lips tightened, and there came into the beautiful features that look of determination which no man ever contemplates with pleasure on a woman's face.

"Then why did you go?" was the natural question, hastily amended by adding, "I beg your pardon, I have no right to ask."

She seemed to recognise the apology.

"I need not answer if I don't like," she said frankly and pleasantly, "but I will. I went because I couldn't help myself. I went because I had no more power of resistance than the wave has when the wind beats it into spray against a rock. I went for the same reason a free African leaves his hut, and his wives, and his grease, and matting, and all that makes his happiness and his home, to cross the sweltering Bight of Benin in the hold of a slaver. I've seen something of *that* too. No, I'm not a soft-hearted person; but I *was* sorry for the slaves. They were like me; they went because they couldn't help themselves."

She looked very handsome now, brightening while she spoke, and Maxwell thought that in a comfortable yacht, with all sea-faring means and appliances, he should not mind even the Bight of Benin with so charming a shipmate.

"I thought ladies never did anything against the grain," said he, trying back on the old, worn theme

of woman's wilfulness and woman's superiority. "I thought that by hook or by crook they always managed to have their own way."

"Then you must know very little about them," was the answer; and Maxwell felt so staggered that while they flew through two whole parishes he held his tongue.

Very little about them — he, a trained campaigner of at least five seasons!—Not a dandy, because there *are* no dandies now, but a dancing-man of the highest quality and calibre — who was asked everywhere, whom everybody knew, who had even led cotillons in the small hours, encouraged by good-humoured smiles from the most illustrious of guests—who had held, ever since he left school, that the proper study of mankind was woman, and that making love was the only pastime which could be permitted to interfere with hunting in the programme of a gentleman's occupations! And now to be told that he knew very little about them! If it was really so, he had better give up the whole thing, marry, and settle down into a fogey at once.

When sufficiently recovered to begin again it was too late to try back on the old line, so he plunged boldly into a fresh subject with the following original remark:

"What a good train this is! We only stop once at Muddleford Junction, and once again between that and Sludgeley, where, I am sorry to say, I get out."

"So do I," she replied, with something approaching a smile.

"How odd!" he said. "Somehow, I fancied that you were going right through. I don't know why, I thought you had arranged yourself in this

carriage for a long journey, and when the guard put me in I was afraid I might be in your way."

Detecting perhaps the insincerity of this flagrant statement, she deserved credit for the perfectly grave politeness with which she answered—

"Not at all. I never can see that one person is justified in monopolising the accommodation for six; and I am such an experienced traveller as to be well able to take care of myself."

"Then, I fear, I can be of no use to you at Sludgeley," said he. "I meant to have offered all kinds of assistance, but you must take the will for the deed."

"I am equally grateful," she answered. "But I have ordered a carriage to meet me, and even if it should fail I do not see quite how you could help. It would be too much to ask you to carry a lady's wardrobe, distributed in two large trunks, and a bonnet-box; though, to be sure, they are lighter than they look."

"That depends on how far you are going," he laughed. "For a short distance it might be done by taking one package at a time. I hope it's not a long drive," he added tenderly; "it gets dark so soon at this time of year."

"Not very," she answered, parrying the insidious question as to her destination. "Though too long for a walking expedition with a load on one's back. But here we are at Muddleford. I *should* be obliged to you if you could get me a cup of tea. The platform looks so wet and sloppy, I had rather not get out."

Of course he was delighted, profuse in offers of every other refreshment, and particular in inquiries as to whether she liked sugar, and how much milk,

and shouldn't he bring a biscuit? etc. Though while he went on his errand a horrid and unjustifiable suspicion came across him that this unwillingness to quit her seat might proceed from some physical deformity his fair fellow-traveller was anxious to conceal. He recollected a story hideous Adonis Brown was fond of telling at his club, how in the olden days of travelling he had fallen in love with a beautiful young lady in the North mail, who persistently declined to alight at any of their numerous stoppages because she had a wooden leg, but it was not till they got to Morpeth that he found it out. If this charming *vis-à-vis* should have a wooden leg too! How Percy Mortimer would laugh, and what a disillusion it would be! Just like his luck: he was always meeting with disillusions! And how was he to discover the truth? It was a great relief when he brought her the tea to observe a pair of very symmetrical boots resting on the foot-warmer, and his only anxiety while he took back the cup was lest Percy should see him and insist on his society as a faithful comrade during the remainder of the journey.

He need not have troubled himself. That gentleman, with an enormous cigar in his mouth, was deep in a stiff controversial work, which he preferred to the conversation of the most intimate friend. Percy was a great reader when the opportunity offered, and never forgot what he read; therefore, it is needless to say, his attention was not easily distracted from his book. Also, like most men who have learned how to *rough* it, he travelled with his comforts about him, quoting the example of one of his friends, who took a portmanteau full of evening clothes and French novels across the Himalayas, observing, with admirable good sense,

"I must have twelve mules for myself and my people. It's only taking thirteen, and there are the little things one wants ready when one wants them."

If this principle were oftener carried out, there would be far more enjoyment in daily life for those classes who seem most discontented, while they possess most of the accessories that mankind in general consider essential to happiness.

The stoppage, the tea, the getting out and in, the effrontery with which Horace repulsed an invading party of one mamma, one nurse, one baby in arms, and two small children, by a barefaced statement that he was just recovering from whooping-cough, seemed to cement the acquaintance of these fellow-travellers into friendship. The discarded foot-warmer had been replaced by a hotter one, of which she insisted on his taking his share; he arranged her wraps, pulled the window up, voted the carriage shook too much to read in comfort, and finally, after a long and desultory conversation, hazarded this touching suggestion—

"I wonder if I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again?"

"Why not?" she responded gaily, "as the French say, 'It is only the mountains that never come together.' Many more extraordinary things happen than meeting people in society whom one—who have been civil to one in a railway"—

"Yes. But the world is large, and it is too provoking to miss the very person of all others you want to see by being a minute too soon or a minute too late, by taking the wrong turn, or calling at the wrong house. Now, if I knew where you were going"—

"You would know as much as I do, and would

have no field for the exercise of that perseverance and ingenuity which I am convinced you possess. They are qualities that deteriorate sadly for want of exercise. When you are asked a riddle, don't you hate being told the answer in the same breath?"

"No; I don't. Tell me the answer."

"But I haven't asked you the riddle yet. Never mind, our journey has been very pleasant, and here we are, I do believe, at my station. You have been most kind and attentive, and I hope we *shall* meet again. Good-bye."

The train stopped, she shook hands with him as he helped her from the carriage, bade a porter follow with her luggage, and left him standing on the platform, gazing after her graceful figure as it vanished through the door of departure

"With a ghost-seer's look when the ghost disappears."

He did not come to himself till his friend clapped him on the shoulder to inform him that "Dennison had sent the brougham, and they had better make a start."

"That's one of the nicest women I ever came across," answered Horace, like a man in a dream. "What an ass I am! She must have had her initials at least on her luggage, and I never thought of looking!"

"What an ass you are to care!" answered his friend. "Surely there are enough nice women in the world without this one. What *can* it matter? If you lose *her* you'll find somebody else. One is as good as another, and better too, as the Irishman said. Jump into the brougham, and if you won't smoke give me a light."

"Percy!" exclaimed the other, "you are a cynic —a heartless cynic. What has brought you to this

state? It can't be experience, for I happen to know you're not half as old as you look."

"There is some comfort in that!" replied his friend with a grim smile. "I congratulate you on putting the case so pleasantly. It's not age, my good fellow, it's wisdom. I like knowledge for its own sake. Even the knowledge that teaches us our gods are clay, our bricks straw, and that our tobacco is shamefully adulterated with cabbage-leaves and opium."

"I never believe in you fellows who pretend you know all about women," argued Horace. "I never believe in any fellow who generalises. Horses have different dispositions, so have dogs; sheep too, and calves, I daresay, if one could only find out. Why should one woman be exactly like another?"

"Why indeed?" replied his friend. "When the same woman is so different different days. I never said they were all alike—I hadn't time; you were in such a hurry to proclaim your own opinion. But I will ask you one question. Why is it that those who know them least have the highest opinion of them?"

"*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*, I suppose," said Horace.

"*Pro terribili*, rather," answered Percy. "In the heart of man is planted a wholesome fear of his natural enemy. Doubtless from an instinct of self-preservation. Nothing amuses me more than to see a defenceless youth under the spells of an aggressive damsel. He is like a puppy playing round a cat, a little fascinated, a good deal puzzled; anxious to be on better terms, and frightened out of his wits all the time."

"And you? I suppose you consider yourself

invincible and impenetrable? as wise as a serpent on this particular subject, and justified in thinking everybody else a fool."

"You express my sentiments in the present instance with considerable clearness. I do *not* think that young man wise who, associating with a lady for an hour or two in a railway carriage, suffers his tranquillity, and consequently his digestion, to be affected by the probability that he will never see her again."

"What has digestion got to do with it? Hang it! my digestion's better than yours!"

"It ought to be. You take frightful liberties with it, and, I imagine, know no more about the delicate and beautiful mechanism of the human stomach than you do about the works in your watch. My dear fellow, I could tell you some most interesting facts bearing on appetite and its consequences, but that the organ we are at present discussing is not the liver—only the heart."

"Heart! I don't believe you ever had one! By Jove! Percy, I should—yes, I *should* like to see a woman get you regularly into her hands. It would be as good as a play."

"I should rather like to see the woman who *could*," answered his friend, letting down the carriage window, and "looking over the side," as he called it, to know how fast they were travelling. "Eleven miles an hour—good. These horses trot well. To be sure, they are going home. By the way, Horace, what sort of a cook has old Dennison got? I dined with him once in London, and there was nothing fit to eat. As it was years ago, however, I trust the performer of that era has left the kitchen for a cooler sphere."

"Oh! I should think he'd give you as good a

dinner as anybody else," replied Horace. "The shooting's capital, I fancy; and there's a pleasant party staying in the house. Not too many, you know; and some nice girls. I *do* like a country-house, don't you?"

"It is too dark to see your face, my dear fellow," replied the other gravely, "so I may be excused for asking if you are in earnest. Do I like being jammed into the society of a herd of people with whom I have nothing in common, whether I will or no, as one is on board ship, only without the change and excitement of a sea-voyage? Do I like to come down early to breakfast, and spoil the whole comfort of that meal by eating it in public, like an old king of France; to be hurried off through wet plantations to a stable, or a kennel, or even a conservatory, if I want to smoke; to be turned out of my bedroom when I retire to write my letters, by the flopping of housemaids, whose presence in every sense pervades the house at all periods of the day; to find the drawing-room resounding with music, the gallery garrisoned by young ladies, and the hall, where there is a spare blotting-book, given up to battledore-and-shuttlecock? Do I like servants waiting at luncheon, cold drives in the afternoon, an enormous tea at six o'clock to spoil one's dinner at eight; the whole concluded by an evening of bad singing and worse whist? No, I do *not* like it, and I can't understand how anybody does."

"Then why do you go?" asked the other.

"Because I don't hate it half as much as I think," replied Percy. "It so often turns out better than one expects. Tell us, have you any idea what sort of people we shall find at this place? We can't be far off now."

"A house full," answered the other. "There's Foster, I know."

"The Master of the Hounds, isn't he?" asked Percy. "I conceive the sort of man exactly: middle-aged, bald, close-shaved, red-faced, and very short in his answers. Sure to sit next one at dinner. I shall ask him if he has had nice hunting this winter, and after that he will let me alone. Who else?"

"His wife," continued Horace; "you won't care much about *her*. A long parson named Lexley—rather a good fellow; I was at Rugby with him. Two plungers, named respectively Nokes and Stokes"—

"Stokes!" interrupted his friend. "Anthony Stokes? I haven't seen him since I dined in his bungalow at Meerut; but I heard from him this morning, and his letter was dated Plumpton Priors. By the way, he was very full of a young lady staying there—a Miss Dennison—spoke of her as an out-and-outer! Shall we find *her*, I wonder?"

"I was coming to that," said Horace. "I had a letter from Lexley, and he was full of her too. He writes as if he was spoony already; but then I think parsons are very easily knocked over."

"They're not bad judges either," replied his friend. "They seem to understand the raw material. Haven't you observed, Horace, what nice girls generally marry parsons, and how they deteriorate in a year or two as parson's wives?"

"No, I haven't," said Maxwell, who had a pretty cousin settled down at a rose-grown rectory in Somersetshire. "Nice girls don't deteriorate in the country more than in London. The fact is, a pretty woman once is a pretty woman always."

"Ah! you've never seen a Circassian thirty years

old!" answered the traveller. "I can tell you, my boy, she's a caution to snakes! I say, we must be in the approach now. It's infernally dark, and the moon has gone in again. I suppose this fellow knows the way to his own door."

But Horace had let the window down and was peering eagerly into the night. Presently he drew in his head.

"I declare I believe it's going to thaw!" said he, in a tone of solemnity suitable to the occasion. "It's pitch dark; the air is much softer, and I fancied just now I felt something like a drop of rain."

"I hope not," replied Mortimer with a shudder, conjuring up a vision of wet mornings in a country-house, to be whiled away with indoor games, general conversation, and other pastimes to which he professed a steady aversion. "I hope not, indeed; and yet you seem to like the idea."

"Why, don't you see," argued Maxwell, "if it thaws we shall have hunting."

"What's the use of that? You haven't sent any horses here, no more have I."

"Oh, Dennison would mount us, I am sure! He is a capital fellow, and can ride pretty straight still, they tell me, if everything goes right; but he seldom comes out now, and keeps two or three hunters, chiefly for his friends. I believe it's a charming country, nearly all grass. Doesn't that tempt you?"

"Not on a strange horse, badly broke, badly bridled, disagreeably fresh, and if one does drop into a run, not fit to go. No, my dear fellow; I hunt for pleasure; and upon my word, when I think of all one goes through, with catching weather, long distances, bad sport, lame horses, and funking

like blazes, there is very little pleasure about it, and one would be much happier sitting at home by the fire."

"So even hunting is not good enough? I never saw such a fellow as you, Percy. Is there anything you *do* like?"

"I like *everything*, my boy; only I'm not an enthusiast; that's to say, one thing does not bore me more than another. Perhaps, after all, the material pleasures of life, the real tangible comforts, are the most enjoyable. I pity a poor devil breaking stones on the road, less for the hard work than the hard fare. It must be so wretched to go home and sit down to a bad dinner in the same clothes—no wash, no slippers, no dressing-room fire. What we all delight in is warmth, ease and repose, a good cook, and a good appetite; good wine, plenty of light, pleasant company, and a comfortable house after a cold journey. Here we are."

"Who would have thought of finding you here?"

CHAPTER IV

CHAMPAGNE—SWEET OR DRY?

NOTHING could induce Percy Mortimer to hurry himself. His dinner-toilet would have been none the less elaborate had he known twenty people were waiting for him to begin their meal. Half an hour's law, however, was accorded, in consideration of the late arrivals; so he emerged from his room, very sleek and well-dressed, to descend the wide staircase, with a few seconds' start of his friend, conscious that he had plenty of time. Following close on his steps, Maxwell reached the landing as Mortimer crossed the hall, and looking down from that point of vantage was no less delighted than surprised to see his companion of the railway, statelier and handsomer than ever in her dinner-dress, stop short on her way to the drawing-room, and accost the traveller with considerable cordiality.

"Good Heavens! Mrs. Delancy!" said Percy, as they shook hands. "Who would have thought of finding *you* here?"

"Hush! Mr. Mortimer," she replied; "not Mrs. Delancy in this house. Perhaps — perhaps — you had better not seem to know me at all." And with

a scared look at Maxwell, as if aware that he had overheard her, she turned very pale, and passed on. Imperturbable Percy followed into the drawing-room without moving a muscle of his countenance, but Maxwell made rather a preoccupied bow to his hostess, and took refuge in the general depression that overhangs an assemblage of people waiting for dinner, to recover his wits a little, and get the better of his surprise.

The important meal being announced almost immediately, and Aunt Emily marshalling her guests with the skill of a practised tactician, he was roused from his meditations by word of command.

"Mr. Maxwell, please to take Miss Blair."

Looking in vain for that lady, he was completely mystified to find his fellow-traveller waiting to place her hand within his arm. "How can she be Miss Blair if she's Mrs. Delancy?" thought Horace. "He *said* 'Mrs. Delancy,' I could take my oath. What does it all mean?"

Like a wise man he pulled himself together, and determined to await the lady's explanation, or to have none at all. She certainly *was* very handsome, seen *en profile*, as she arranged herself at the dinner-table; very classical, and well-dressed. He stole a look at her left hand, but could not make out if she wore a wedding-ring; yet his friend called her "Mrs. Delancy," not "Miss," he was sure.

The soup passed off without a word, but before they brought him lobster sauce for his turbot she turned round, and in a low voice observed—

"I told you it was only the mountains that never came together. I had not an idea then that we were to meet this evening. I don't think I half thanked you for your kindness when I got out of the train. Thank you, now. I'd stand up and

make a curtsey if we were not at dinner. But I mean it; you were most attentive and polite."

"You must have thought me a great bore when I forced my way into your carriage," said he, beginning to feel that he had taken a liberty. "But the train was full—the guard hustled me in at the last moment, and there was nothing for it but to intrude on you or be left behind."

"I am glad you were not left behind," she answered, "particularly on my account, and I am sure you did everything in your power to find another place. I never saw so scared a face as yours when you passed along the train on your way from the bookstall. I felt quite sorry for you —ordered helplessly into my carriage, whether you would or no."

The tone convinced him that she had detected, and was not displeased by, his admiration at first sight. It emboldened him to embark on a flirtation without delay.

"I am very grateful to the guard," he said. "I own I did linger at the door of the carriage you were in, with some faint hope my luck might land me there for the whole journey. I trust you are not displeased at the confession."

Horace had a great idea of "making running from the start," as he called it. She replied rather coldly—

"There is nothing to please or displease me in the matter; but you behaved very badly to your friend in deserting him without a word of excuse."

"Oh, Percy Mortimer don't mind," said Horace; "he likes nobody's society so well as his own; and he's not far wrong, for a pleasanter fellow one seldom comes across. But you know him, don't

you? I saw you shake hands with him when we came down to dinner."

The pale face certainly turned paler, while she answered, looking straight before her—

"Yes—no—that is to say—(give me a little water, please)—I've met him abroad. He's been a great traveller, you know, and so have I."

"Exactly," replied Horace carelessly, yet with intention. "A travelling acquaintance, like myself; only I wonder you didn't make a deeper impression, for I heard him call you by a wrong name."

There was no doubt of her paleness now; even her lips were white. But at this juncture an arm clad in broadcloth came between them, and a solemn voice, offering "Champagne — sweet or dry?" afforded a moment's respite, during which she recovered her presence of mind, and prepared for a bold stroke.

"Mr. Maxwell," said she, looking him full in the face with her clear grey eyes, "can you keep a secret?"

"Every gentleman can," he answered in a low earnest voice.

"Without understanding, or trying, or even wishing, to understand it?"

"Honour is honour. Miss Blair, tell me your secret."

While he spoke, one of those ominous silences which are apt to fall on a dinner-party at the most inconvenient moments, caused everybody to turn an expectant ear for her answer. In parliamentary language, Miss Blair was "in possession of the house," and few ladies could have been less embarrassed by the situation.

"I like sweet champagne better than dry," said she, with perfect gravity; "it is a humiliating

confession, yet I don't feel the least ashamed of it."

"Bravo!" exclaimed young Perigord, who had been trying both. "She's quite right. So do I."

The din of conversation began again, louder for its temporary cessation. She took advantage of it to whisper in Maxwell's ear—

"I know I can trust you. I wonder what you think of it all; but you will never allude to this again?"

"To your liking for sweet champagne?" he answered, laughing. "Certainly not. Trust me all in all, or not at all—whichever you please. But there's a deal of bad wine about," he added, conscious that his voice was again rather too audible. "Lots of stuff they call champagne, that has no sort of right to the name."

"What *is* in a name?" said Miss Blair.

And they felt they understood each other from that moment.

It was a pleasant sensation enough, Maxwell thought, to have made a treaty of alliance with this handsome and mysterious dame. He knew so little of her, and admired her so much, not having made out who she was, why she came, what position she occupied in society, nor indeed anything about her, except that she was very good-looking and perfectly well-dressed. Unlike his friend Mortimer, Horace dearly loved the easy life of a country-house; but he began to think that this was going to be one of the most agreeable visits he had ever paid, and found himself hoping the weather would be too bad to permit out-of-door amusements, and that he might find an excuse for spending all to-morrow in the society of this charming person, whom he did not quite like to think of as Mrs.

Delancy, yet could hardly bring himself to call Miss Blair.

And she, being a true woman, determined to accept the pleasure of the moment without consideration for results. She had liked Horace Maxwell's looks when she saw him on the platform of the railway station, and was by no means averse to his sharing the solitude of her journey. He improved on acquaintance, and in wishing him goodbye she was perfectly sincere while she expressed a hope of meeting him again. It was decidedly a pleasant surprise to find that they were inmates of the same house, and when she was recognised so unexpectedly in his hearing by his friend, she felt that to no one would she rather become an object of curiosity, and consequently of interest, than to the good-looking, agreeable young gentleman who sat at dinner by her side.

It was her nature to enjoy the present without troubling herself about the future, and the course of her life from girlhood had taught her to bask in such gleams of sunshine as she could catch, undismayed by the clouds that were lowering in the future, undefeated by the storms that had devastated the past.

"I can take care of myself," she thought, "or my training has been indeed worse than useless, and I need not be afraid of burning my own fingers at a game I have resolved never to play in earnest again. I suppose he can't stay less than three days, and it will give one quite an interest in life to see how much may be done in so short a time. I shall make him like me just enough to feel that he has never before had so delightful a visit, and to be quite low and uncomfortable for a week after he goes away; not more. He is very nice, and it

would be a shame to make him unhappy, though he couldn't complain, for I believe men never have mercy upon *us*. He looks as if he would *care* too, when one gets through the outer crust of worldliness they all think it necessary to affect—as if it were a merit to possess no sympathies, no opinions, no feelings, and no brains. Men with eyes like his always have some romance in them, if one can only get at it, and a man's romance is more utterly idiotic, I do think, than a woman's! I have made a good beginning. I don't remember ever doing so much in so few hours; but to-morrow morning, when we come down to breakfast, will be the test. I have seen them in the most degraded state of slavery when they handed one's candle at bedtime, and free as air, with an excellent appetite, next morning. I fancy they exchange horrid sentiments in the smoking-room, and reflect on them while they shave. I do not think, though, I shall be silly enough to let him escape like that. Three whole days! Yes, in three days I ought to bring him thoroughly and scientifically into bondage. I know I could if I had him all to myself; but just at the first stage anything like interference is apt to spoil the whole thing. Let me see; who is there here that I need be afraid of? Nobody but Miss Dennison; the others are all old women or guys. But she *might* be dangerous with all that beautiful hair, and the half-shy manner men find so captivating, admiring it as they do a smart dress, without troubling themselves to know how it is made and put on. Well, she's got her hands full now, at anyrate. I never saw Percy Mortimer so taken before."

During these meditations dinner proceeded solemnly through its appointed routine, on the

different courses of which Mortimer experimentalised coolly and perseveringly to the end. The great business of eating, however, did not prevent his appreciating the good looks and good-humour of his neighbour, Annie Dennison, whose refined beauty, freshened up by country air, was exactly to the taste of a man who had studied and compared the personal advantages of women in every climate under the sun. She too could not but enjoy the conversation of one of the best-informed and pleasantest talkers in London, so they soon struck up an alliance, cemented by the playful manner in which she identified for him the different guests, with most of whom he was unacquainted.

"You are always amusing, Miss Dennison," said he, "and never ill-natured. I feel as if I had known and respected everybody here from boyhood. Even Mrs.—what did you say her name was?—the lady with a head like a haystack, and a double chin—no, I beg your pardon, a double chin doubled over again."

"I have already told you," answered Annie, laughing in spite of herself; "but if you choose to make personal remarks I shall leave you to your ignorance, and devote myself to an admirer I have been neglecting sadly on my other side."

"So you ought," said the Etonian, who occupied that position. "You've hardly spoken three words to me since I sat down. You'll be sorry for it to-morrow, when I'm gone."

"I'm sorry for it now," replied Miss Dennison; "but it's too late for reparation. When Aunt Emily begins putting her gloves on, it means we're all to take flight. There—I told you so—run and open the door, that's a good boy!"

The young gentleman having performed this

office with creditable self-possession, returned to seat himself by Percy, and filling his glass with claret, observed, after a deep sigh, "Oh dear! I wish I was grown up. Wouldn't I just like to be *you*, Mr. Mortimer, and not going away to-morrow. It seems so jolly to be a man!"

With that the young reprobate winked solemnly, and passed the decanters, recommending his neighbour to make the best use of his time, for they had dined half an hour later than usual, and the butler would bring coffee at a quarter to ten—"The only thing," he whispered, "that I should like to see altered in this house."

"How do you manage at Eton?" asked Percy, much delighted with his new friend. "In my time there was no claret, and if I remember right, very little coffee."

"Were you at Eton?" exclaimed the boy. "Tell us, wasn't it much jollier then than it is now? Only they swished a good deal more, didn't they? I'm not so sure I should have liked *that*."

"It was very good fun," answered Percy, who entertained no great belief in the delights of boyhood, but had a vivid recollection of birch and block. "Still, I don't think I should like to do it all over again."

"That's just what I say," continued the lad, his eyes sparkling, his tongue loosened, the bloom and brightness of his youth freshened, like May flowers after rain, by Mr. Dennison's good wine. "Now my governor's always preaching to me about this being the happiest time of my life — that I've no cares, no troubles, only a few lessons to do, and nothing else to think of but enjoying myself. I don't know; it seems to me when you're grown up

there are six whole holidays every week, no chapel, no absence called, and no lock-up at night."

"Don't you think a life of whole holidays would get very wearisome at last?" said Lexley. "All play and no work would make Jack a duller boy than the reverse. Don't you find the days a little too long sometimes, even now?"

"No, I don't," answered Perigord. "Not when there's lots of cricket. I say, I saw you play once at Lord's. Do you remember what a good score you made off Twister's bowling? I wish you would take pupils; I'd ask my governor to let me come to you directly I leave Eton — I know he means to take me away the end of next half."

Having thus delivered himself, the young gentleman coloured violently, edged his chair nearer the clergyman, and stammered—

"I say, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to take a liberty—only if I could do what I liked, I would rather read with *you* than any fellow I ever saw."

"He's a gentleman," thought Percy, "this noisy young scamp"; and wishing to cover the boy's embarrassment, warmly encouraged the idea.

"You might do worse, Mr. Lexley," said he. "It would be a capital thing for Mr. Perigord, and a pleasant fellow to keep you company in that lonely parsonage would be the greatest blessing on earth. I advise you to consider it."

"I shouldn't mind," replied the clergyman, laughing, "if Perigord ever thinks of it again—which is doubtful."

"I'll ask the governor directly I get home," exclaimed the boy, delighted to find his suggestion taken in good part. "Won't it be jolly? We'll make a cricket-ground, get up an eleven, and play the county. *I* told you so—here comes old Dot-

and-go-one with the coffee. Half a glass of sherry, please; I always allow myself a 'whitewash'; thanks. I feel better now, and almost equal to joining the ladies."

So he followed the gentlemen across the hall in the highest spirits, no whit diminished by a little interview with Uncle John, who brought up the rear, when a warm shake of the hand and something like the chink of gold passed between the host and his boyish guest.

Though strictly "private and confidential," this delicate transaction was detected by Mr. Foster, who lingered in his official capacity to consult a barometer that stood near the door.

"Fallen more than a quarter of an inch," said he, in his short dry tones; "thought it would change when I drove back from the kennels. If the wind gets up it will do."

"Do you think we shall be obliged to hunt?" asked Uncle John, considering how many people he would have to mount, and wondering if the stud-groom had gone to bed.

"No frost in the ground," answered Mr. Foster; "two hours' rain would take all the snow away, particularly in that Middleton country. If it's a *good* thaw we might hunt at twelve o'clock. Glad I sent out the appointments for *this* week at anyrate. Plumpton Bridge is only two miles from here. The ladies won't have to make an early start."

"You'll draw Plumpton Osiers, of course?" said Uncle John. "It's a certainty for a run."

"There was a good fox there last time," answered Mr. Foster, following the other gentlemen into the drawing-room.

His entrance caused all the party to move from their seats as if they had been playing Puss-in-the-

Corner, upsetting thereby one or two pleasant arrangements for prolonged *tête-à-têtes.*

"It's a thaw, Mr. Foster!" exclaimed Miss Dennison, making him a profound curtsey in the middle of the room. "No more skating for *us*,—no more grumbling for *you.* I can hear the old ash at the window moaning and creaking as if he had the rheumatism in all his branches; and Aunt Emily's maid, who has been down in the village, came back half an hour ago wet through and through. What is it doing now, John?" she asked of a footman who appeared with tea.

"Raining 'ard, miss," replied John, inwardly rejoicing that his duties rendered him profoundly indifferent to weather.

So one lady after another fired her little volley at Mr. Foster, even Miss Blair expressing satisfaction and wishing him good sport. Only his wife and Aunt Emily remained unmoved. Mrs. Foster's rest had been broken on many a cold winter's night by her husband's anxiety about the weather, and Aunt Emily scorned every kind of amusement as being more or less a waste of time.

On John's reappearance to collect empty teacups, his master created a strong sensation by bidding him "let Mr. Surcingle know he was not to send any horses out to-morrow morning till he had been to the house for orders." And when Foster demanded emphatically "if it was quite certain the country would be stopped?" everybody felt that the great business of winter life was about to begin again.

"I suppose we all mean to hunt?" said the host, after a pause of consideration. "Annie, you can ride Sweep; I don't want you to come to grief, and no power on earth would induce Sweep to attempt a fence he wasn't sure of getting over."

"Thank you, Uncle John," replied Annie.

"Miss Blair," continued Dennison, "what would you like to do? There will be two carriages and plenty of room. Will you go on wheels?"

"If you please," answered Miss Blair. "I daresay Mrs. Dennison will be going too."

"Mrs. Foster, yourself, Emily, and one of the gentlemen, would fill the waggonette. Lexley, will you take care of them?"

Mr. Lexley would be delighted. He was "not a hunting parson," he said, and already had begun to debate in his own mind whether Miss Blair in the carriage would not prove as attractive a companion as Annie Dennison on horseback.

"The barouche can take four more," continued Uncle John. "And now for the hard riders. Have you two soldiers made any arrangements for going into action so suddenly?"

Stokes had left orders with his groom to bring on a horse if the hounds came; and Nokes's servant would do whatever Stokes's servant did.

"I can manage the rest well enough," said Mr. Dennison. "Mortimer, you shall ride Tiptop. He's nearly as old as I am; but a better hunter never went into a field. Bold, temperate, fast, and *very* confidential."

Percy Mortimer expressed great unwillingness to trespass on his host's kindness; he had no regular hunting things, he was always afraid of hurting another man's horse, he didn't know his way about, he wasn't used to the country, etc.; but all such excuses were overruled by Uncle John and scouted by his niece.

"If you don't want to ride," said Annie, looking very mischievous and pretty, "I mean *really* to ride, you can come through the gates and take care of *me*."

Percy Mortimer had seen many a good run in his life. He thought it would be no great hardship to lose one while engaged in so congenial an occupation.

"There's only Maxwell unprovided for," observed the host, turning to that gentleman. "I could manage for you too," he added thoughtfully, "if you don't dislike riding a young horse."

"You're not going to mount him on Barmecide?" exclaimed Aunt Emily. "The brute ran away with one of the grooms the very last day he was out."

Nobody but Foster detected the shadow of anxiety that crossed Miss Blair's face; but the M.F.H. was a man who saw everything and said nothing.

"Barmecide will make a very good hunter," answered the owner. "He's a little eager and troublesome when hounds are not running, but if you don't mind that, Maxwell, and his having rather a light mouth, he will carry you in a run as well as anything I've got."

Horace, who was a good horseman, expressed his gratitude, and already imagined himself sailing away over the wide pastures of Plumpton Lordship and Middleton Lacy.

"Then there's nothing left for *you*, Uncle John," expostulated Annie, who always took him under her own especial care. "Boniface is lame, and the Weazel is much too small for a hunter."

"The Weazel will do perfectly well, Annie," answered her uncle. "I don't think I shall even go to see you find, for I must attend a magistrates' meeting in Middleton at one, so you shall tell me all about it when you come home. Only mind, I won't have you ride too straight, even on Sweep."

Many and loud were the protestations of

Mortimer and Maxwell as to taking Mr. Dennison's horses, dismounting him, and so forth, all of which he cut short with more good-nature than sincerity.

"I couldn't hunt if I would," said he, "and I wouldn't if I could. I tire before my horse now. I am afraid of getting wet, and I daren't ride over a water furrow if I'm cold. The fireside is the best place for old gentlemen in bad weather. I wish I wasn't obliged to go to this meeting to-morrow, but there is no help for it."

"You always make yourself out so much older than you are!" cried Miss Annie. "I believe it's laziness. The very last time the hounds met here, who was it jumped the Plumpton Brook before all the young men? Mr. Foster told me; didn't you, Mr. Foster?"

"He ought to have known better," said the M.F.H.

"I was on Tiptop," replied Uncle John, trying not to look pleased. "Foster's quite right; there's no fool like an old one; but I couldn't bear to disappoint the horse. If you come to water, Mortimer, you may ride at it with perfect confidence. Directly he sees the willows he makes up his mind. Now let's have some music."

So the rector's daughters sang their duet pretty well, Maxwell talking to Miss Dennison in an audible whisper all the time, and then Nokes, coming out in a new light, and urged by the entreaties of his comrade, gave them an excellent comic song, the effect of which was much enhanced by his gravity during its delivery. In the lull that succeeded there arose a call for Annie, but that young lady strenuously refused to leave her seat.

"Everything's flat after a good comic song," said she, "and you'd all begin to laugh again if I

were to sit down and croak out one of my melancholy ditties. Mr. Maxwell, if you're not afraid, I'll fight you at bézique."

"What business has she to take possession of him like that?" thought Miss Blair, who was no great card-player, and had already made an almost imperceptible motion of her skirt, which he might have interpreted as a permission to sit on the ottoman by her side. "I wonder if she's very innocent or very artful. I believe she's a flirt. As if Mr. Maxwell wasn't enough, there's Mr. Mortimer looking over her hand, advising her. Oh! I dare-say. Much advice *you* require, you rapacious little wretch!—and if I chose—if I only chose—I could sail down upon you, and cut you out with both in less than five minutes. I've a great mind to try, only Mrs. Dennison wouldn't like it; and, after all, what's the use? What's the use of anything now? Oh dear! oh dear! how I wish I had my time to come over again!"

She was no longer in the drawing-room at Plumpton Priors; she was living in the past once more, and looking back on many a varied scene of romance, triumph, excitement—everything but real happiness. Sailing on golden seas in the moonlit night of the tropics, riding camels through the blazing noon of the desert, holding animated converse, with a black mask on, in foreign ball-rooms—listening, as Eve listened to the serpent, while a soft voice told the old false tale under the cedars in an island of the Greek sea. Now in pleasure and triumph, anon in shame and sorrow; but up or down, rich or poor, in the flush of success or the humiliation of defeat, always draining the cup of life to the dregs, and always finding more bitter than sweet in the draught.

And once she had been such a happy, frank-hearted girl. Good? Yes, surely she was good then; anxious only to fulfil her daily task, and pleased with a word of approval from those who taught. Could she be the same being that once found pleasure in making her doll's clothes and driving a hoop round the garden? Impossible! She felt pity for herself, as if the life she was looking back on had been another's and not her own. Aunt Emily's voice quite startled her with its imperious request, "Laura, will you play us something?" and the harsh tones, less of entreaty than command, had to be repeated more than once before she woke up sufficiently to obey.

As she walked to the pianoforte she was herself again, and it did not escape her penetration that two gentlemen of the party were already sufficiently interested to desist from their respective occupations at the mention of her Christian name. Horace Maxwell blundered the "royal marriage" he was entitled to mark, while Lexley deserted Mrs. Foster, to whom he was talking by the fire, without finishing his sentence, and marched across the room to search for music, turn over leaves, and place his services generally at the disposal of the performer.

Play them something! She determined she *would* play them something, and that in a style to which they were totally unaccustomed. From her earliest childhood she had made the pianoforte a confidant and expositor of her inmost feelings; a rare natural talent had been developed by unremitting practice, and there were few professional players who could have rivalled Miss Blair in taste, sentiment, and finish on her favourite instrument.

So she let her fingers wander over the keys in a slow, wild, monotonous movement, that seemed to

grow into music as the painter's sketch grows into a picture. There were chords—there were variations — there was much brilliancy of execution — but through it all ran a sad sweet strain that woke in each listener's heart the one dear memory of a lifetime. Before she had played five minutes cards were neglected, voices hushed, and over each attentive face, of old and young, men and women alike, came the gentle, wistful look of those who recall an unforgotten sorrow, who turn once more, resigned, but spirit-broken, to say farewell across a grave.

When the last faint notes, floating, as it were, dreamily away, trembled into silence, even Aunt Emily, shading her face with a fire-screen, had tears in her eyes, while Mrs. Foster, the least impressionable person that could be imagined, sobbed outright.

Perhaps, however, Algernon Lexley, a man of warm feelings and vivid imagination, the stronger that it was habitually repressed, felt more than the rest how resistless were the spells of this enchantress. Three short hours ago, making the best of his appearance while dressing, he had been quite prepared to fall in love with Annie Dennison, but now it began to seem impossible that he should have been attracted by any woman on earth except Miss Blair. Her pale beauty, her air of high breeding (so often independent of high birth), her tasteful dress, above all, something half sad, half reckless in the expression of her face, as if she were a woman with a history, seemed especially captivating to a man of cultivated mind, who lived in the retirement of a country parish; but when she sat down to the pianoforte, and drew the heart out of his breast with such music as she alone could make, it was all over! Lexley did not even feel ashamed to admit that he, who had been a free man at a

quarter before eleven p.m., was seriously, irrevocably madly in love with a lady of whom he knew literally nothing, at a quarter past.

A silence, more flattering than the loudest applause, succeeded her performance, broken at length by Percy Mortimer's ill-advised "Encore!"

Looking up, she caught Lexley's eyes fixed on her with an expression there was no mistaking, though he averted them in confusion, and exclaimed almost rudely, "No, no! Let us go to bed and dream, with that beautiful air ringing in our ears!"

"Thank you, Mr. Lexley," said she. "Do you know, that is the prettiest compliment ever paid to my music yet?"

He blushed—actually blushed—like a boy, and turned away without answering, while the rest of the party expressed their admiration in the usual terms; young Perigord adding, "that he should like very much to hear Nokes sing his song over again."

In less than half an hour a hush of rest pervaded the length and breadth of Plumpton Priors. Gentle snores might indeed be heard in pantry and attics, but with the exception of one other apartment, profound silence, only broken by the pattering of rain on roof and skylight, reigned in bed-chambers, galleries, and corridors, through the whole building.

This apartment, too, was occupied less noisily than usual. In spite of a blazing fire, sporting prints, an array of soda-water bottles, a square spirit case, and such easy-chairs and ample sofas as denoted the smoking-room, it contained but two inmates, Mortimer and Maxwell; the traveller arrayed in gorgeous costume, like an Eastern prince, his friend clad in a tattered suit of grey that seemed to have done good service in the Highlands of Scotland. Each gentleman, with six inches of

tobacco in his mouth, looked very comfortable, and disposed to hold his tongue. Mortimer was the first to speak.

"How it rains!" said he. "Listen, Horace! What an 'ender' you'll get to-morrow with the young one, about the third fence!"

"That's a pleasant remark," answered the other, "and encouraging to a friend. I begin to wish he had offered me Tiptop, only I suppose nothing would induce you to get on a five-year-old?"

"Nothing," said Percy conclusively.

"Then it's better as it is. Well, I shouldn't wonder if we do have a gallop. One generally drops into sport after a frost; and it's a rare good country. I say, Percy, that's a charming woman we came down with in the train."

"*We!* You mean *you.* I had nothing to do with it. I never was more surprised in my life than when I found her here."

Each gentleman puffed out a volume of smoke, and looked in the other's face. Horace would have given a great deal to ask his friend a single question; Percy had every inclination personally to satisfy the other's curiosity, but both felt that between them there was a woman's secret, and respected it accordingly.

"Have some soda-water?" asked Maxwell, after a pause, pouring a little brandy into a glass the size of a stable-pail. "I tell you I don't think I ever heard such a player before. I wouldn't have believed a pianoforte could be made to do so much."

"How its legs will fill to-morrow," said Percy; "like Barmecide's when you've had your fun out of him in this deep ground. I thought you hated music, Horace."

"Not such music as that," answered Maxwell indignantly. "It was enough to make a fellow cry. Lexley *did*. At least, I saw him take out his handkerchief."

"He seems rather a good fellow, that long parson, though he *is* a friend of yours," yawned Mortimer. "I shall be off to bed when I've finished this cigar."

"I wonder if she's going to stay," continued the other, still harping on the musician. "I should like to hear her play again."

"She'll stay longer than you do," replied his friend; "and play whenever she is asked. I fancy she is a sort of companion to Mrs. Dennison. The niece told me all about it in the drawing-room, only she said they made a secret of the whole thing."

"Women always make secrets," observed Maxwell, lighting his candle.

"And always let them out," said Mortimer. "Good-night."

CHAPTER V

PLUMPTON OSIERS

FOR any purpose but hunting, a less promising morning has seldom dawned than that which met Mr. Foster's eyes as he opened his dressing-room window and looked out. The storm had lulled indeed, but a steady, warm rain fell persistently, and already there were few patches of snow to be seen, even in the most sheltered corners of the park.

"Hounds might run to-day," thought the M.F.H. while he shaved. "And if there's anything like a scent in that country, a run from the Osiers means about the best thing of the season. We're *sure* to find; no doubt of *that*, I think. Hang it! I hope Potter will get his hounds away together. What a mess he made of it last time!" Then he cut himself, and went to his wife's room for sticking-plaster. While he adjusted a patch, what a number of things he thought of, and how many were calculated to mar his anticipations of enjoyment! Where were they likely to leave off? And how should he arrange for his second draw? If the fox made his point for Stockwell Lings, the line would be straight across Screwman's farm, and next day's post was safe to bring him a complaint for damage done to young wheat; whereas if he faced the Vale, with the hope of reaching Marston main earths, the hounds

would run right through the park at Lower Plumpton, a district literally alive with hares, and there would be six couple of puppies out whom he could trust only where they had no temptation to riot. Then Jim, the second whip, a very useful lad, was inclined to be delicate, so a thorough wetting would do him no good; while it was Whitethorn's turn to carry Potter, and, like many others, he was not quite a good horse in deep ground. Forty minutes on a day like this would be sure to see him out. Altogether, by the time the M.F.H. got down to breakfast he had created a whole catalogue of failures and contingencies, any one of which would be sufficient to spoil his day's amusement.

A man need be very fond of hunting to undertake the management of a country, even under the most favourable circumstances.

Mr. Foster was devoted, heart and soul, to the chase. No doubt he had his reward. Coming down to breakfast, he became, of course, the object of attention to all. Annie sugared and creamed his tea, with the utmost nicety; Miss Blair handed him an egg; the butler cut for him the thinnest slices of ham and brought the hottest kidney; while Uncle John, munching dry toast, reiterated his conviction that Plumpton Osiers would prove a sure find and afford the moral certainty of a run.

Breakfast was a cheerful meal at the Priors, perhaps none the less so that Aunt Emily made a practice of appearing late, although, on occasions like the present, when she came down in her bonnet, she was apt to make up for lost time by unusual abruptness of manner and brevity of reply.

Annie Dennison, in her aunt's absence, sat at one end of the table to make tea. She was very pretty in a riding-habit, with her abundant hair coiled

into a silky crown over her brows. Percy on one side, and Miss Blair on the other, observed, with different feelings, how pleasant and bright and fresh she looked.

"No red coat, Mr. Mortimer?" exclaimed Annie, as that gentleman stretched an arm, clad in convict's grey, to reach the toast. "What an insult to Tiptop! I hope you have not dressed yourself so badly because you are going to ride with *me*?"

"The very privilege that makes me regret I didn't bring hunting things," answered Mortimer. "My get-up is even worse, I fear, below the waist. Something between a Low Church bishop and a man going to buy pigs. Don't ask me to bring you anything from the side-table, Miss Dennison."

While he spoke, Lexley made his appearance, and finding his usual seat occupied, looked wistfully towards an empty place by Miss Blair. His heart failed him, however, and he took a chair opposite with an embarrassment of manner that did not escape so shrewd an observer. Even while she wondered what made Mr. Maxwell late, she began to suspect that here was another captive of her bow and spear.

"I hope you slept well and had pleasant dreams, Mr. Lexley," said Annie, who had no idea of resigning any of her regular admirers. "Five minutes ago I could have given you a much stronger cup of tea."

"I never dream," answered the clergyman; then catching Miss Blair's eye, coloured, made an awkward bow, looked foolish, and spilt his tea; while that lady, who read him like a book, preserved an appearance of complete unconsciousness, as only a woman can.

"I dreamt of Miss Blair's music," said the

untruthful Mortimer, who slept like a top, and was little given to visions of fancy by night or day. "As for Horace, I have no doubt he is dreaming still. You had better send up to him, Mr. Dennison. If he gets the chance, he is quite capable of remaining in bed till the end of the week. Every fellow, you know, has his own particular gifts."

"There is plenty of time," answered Uncle John, looking at his watch. "Nobody need start for half an hour yet. And I *do* believe it is going to clear."

Liberal and encouraging as was the announcement, it caused a general break-up. Annie had to adjust her riding-hat, Miss Blair to put on her things. Mortimer liked to smoke a cigarette before starting, and Lexley went to search the hall for his greatcoat. Even Mrs. Foster had finished breakfast when Horace Maxwell came down, so he drank his tea *tête-à-tête* with Aunt Emily, and afterwards confided to his friend that "he had a roughish time of it, and would take care not to be late again."

Nevertheless, before the party could get under weigh, there was little time to spare. Mr. Foster, on his hack, had been gone half an hour; though he would wait for them, of course, it was the one thing of all others that destroyed his equanimity for the day, so the carriages were started with as little delay as possible, and Lexley found himself, to his unspeakable happiness, packed into the waggonette opposite Miss Blair. Their host was a good weather prophet, and he had not even the drawback of holding an umbrella to keep off the rain. Annie Dennison and Mortimer jogged on together: Sweep rather fidgety and troublesome; Tiptop in unruffled composure, as scorning to waste his energies till required for real business. The young lady looked back more than once. Mr. Maxwell, she was afraid,

would never find the bridle-way across the meadows by himself. She hoped the young horse would carry him safely; he did not always behave as well as he ought.

But Barmecide and his rider were occupied in making each other's acquaintance, and this is the way an intimacy was brought about:—

Maxwell, crossing the hall to the stables, peeped into the den where Uncle John wrote his letters, to apologise for having no hunting things—"not even a pair of spurs!" and he glanced down at his drab breeches and black boots; "though perhaps that is all the better—they only tear a horse to pieces if he falls."

So congenial a sentiment sank gratefully in the ears of Uncle John, who loved a hunter as his own child, and could forgive the animal anything if it had but courage.

"Barmecide don't require spurs," said he. "Quite the reverse; as I told you last night, he wants a light hand, but my servants don't know how to bit him. If I were a younger man, I should like him better than anything in the stable."

"Can you give me a hint how to ride him?" asked Horace, with modest deference.

"Yes, I can," answered his good-natured host. "Send him along as if he was your own. Go into every field with the hounds. Don't be afraid—he's as near thoroughbred as possible—he's quite fit to go, and a hard day will do him all the good in the world."

With so liberal a margin to his sailing orders, Horace stalked into the stable-yard, and mounted in the utmost confidence.

The helper who brought out Barmecide was the same the horse had run away with ten days

before. He looked up in the rider's face with a broad grin.

"Mind as he doesn't bolt with you, sir," said he. "I've took the curb in as tight as ever it will go; but he's a hard-mouthed one, he is, and if once he gets his head I don't think as a giant would be able to stop him."

"Thank ye, my lad," answered Horace, pulling his stirrups to the right length, while he sidled out of the yard, Barmecide curveting and passaging in as uncomfortable a manner as could well be imagined.

No sooner was he hidden from sight by an angle of the shrubbery than he leapt lightly down, took the curb off altogether, and put it in his pocket. While doing so, he could not fail to admire the points and beauty of the animal he was going to ride.

"Fifteen three, and a bit," thought Maxwell; "brown, with tan muzzle; large flat legs; long muscular shoulders; a back like a prize-fighter's, a head like a lady's, and a game wild eye that means facing anything at any pace while hounds are running. I *do* hope we shall have some fun together to-day; for I think I never saw a better-looking horse in my life!"

Then he jumped quickly into the saddle, and started at a canter across the park.

Barmecide, expecting the usual torture from a heavy-handed stable-boy, plunged, reached at his bridle, shook his head violently, and finding his mouth still quite comfortable, bent his neck to lay himself out for a gallop with a snort of approval and delight. Ere the pair arrived at the lodge they were on the best of terms, and understood each other perfectly.

"You're a flyer!" said Maxwell aloud, as he subsided into a trot, and emerged on the turnpike road.

"Yes, sir," answered the old woman who opened the gate, never doubting but his observation was addressed to herself.

Half a mile farther on, he spied Miss Dennison and her companion cantering along a bridle-road, two fields off. Without hesitation he turned from the highway to ride at a fair hunting fence, which his horse jumped beautifully, and clearing a flight of rails out of the next enclosure, joined them in a state of considerable satisfaction and self-confidence.

"How nicely he goes with you!" said Miss Annie, "and how pleased Uncle John will be! Look; you can see Plumpton Bridge now, just at the end of the brook. The carriages must have got there before us, for I declare Mr. Foster is moving off already."

The three then put their horses into a canter and made for the place of meeting. Barmecide did not go quite so pleasantly in company, and Horace, whose fearlessness was the result of skill, not ignorance, felt he should like his mount better if it would but take example by the calm, disciplined courage of Tiptop.

There was no time to lose. Plumpton Osiers, a flat, square willow-bed, of about four acres, with a dry bank of thorns and brushwood overhanging it on the north side, was the kind of covert that a good fox leaves at a short notice. As it lay only half a mile off Plumpton Bridge, there was a chance of its being disturbed by some of the foot people who congregate at a favourite meet, and Mr. Foster always seemed anxious to get his hounds into it as quickly as possible. To draw Plumpton Osiers

blank was one of the calamities that haunted his dreams. To-day he appeared in a greater hurry than usual. The change in the weather had been so unexpected, the thaw so sudden, that few regular attendants thought of coming. The carriages from the Priors, two or three squires who lived close at hand, half a dozen farmers, a sporting lawyer, and a horse-breaker, constituted the whole assemblage, and his face relaxed into something like a smile, while he brought his horse alongside of his huntsman, amongst the fawning looks and waving sterns of their favourites.

"It's not such a bad day, after all," said he, "since it cleared. No sun, no wind ('ware horse, Abigail!), and plenty of wet in the ground. A nice little field, too, and we won't wait to see if any more are coming. Move on, Potter; the sooner we get to work the better."

So Potter, with a good-looking lot at his horse's heels, trotted off to the covert without delay.

Thus it fell out that Miss Dennison and her two cavaliers, followed by a servant, were still a quarter of a mile from the Osiers, when the light note of a young hound, corroborated by the deeper tones of his senior, and by a merry chorus from the pack, proclaimed a find.

"Don't let us go on!" exclaimed Percy, coming to a sudden halt. "We shall head him, to a certainty; but I think we can't do any harm here."

"If he goes away at the other end, we shall be done!" answered Horace, reining in Barmecide, who showed a great deal of impatience.

"Hush!" said the other, in an awestricken whisper. "Miss Dennison, I beseech you, not a word!"

Maxwell's attention was wholly engrossed by

his horse; but Annie, following the direction of Mortimer's eyes, observed the fox travelling straight across the adjoining field.

He was a lengthy, magnificent fellow; of the richest possible brown, with a full, white-tipped brush, that made him look twice his natural size. If he saw them behind the thick hedge through which they watched him it did not affect his intentions. He seemed to have made up his mind, and to mean going.

With one glance at Potter's white horse, conspicuous in the distance against the dark background of covert through which he scrambled, Percy put his hand to his mouth for a view-holloa, but lowered it without yielding to temptation. "Better not," he murmured; "they're coming as fast as they can. By Jove, what a scent there is! Hark together, my beauties! There's the horn! Here they are!"

The pack were indeed streaming over the grass on the line of their fox, with just so much music from those in front as assured the rest it was well worth while to get up to the leaders. Potter, on Whitethorn, was leaping the fence out of the covert. Mr. Foster, followed by the field, came splashing along the water-meadows as fast as he could gallop. It was a stirring moment; everything looked like a run. Tiptop cocked his ears and began to tremble.

For a minute, Mortimer wavered. He glanced at the fence in front, at the groom behind, at the young lady by his side.

"Don't mind *me*," she said; "I can get on very well with Robert. *Please* don't stay, if you'd rather not!"

"One of us ought to take care of you," answered Percy; and perhaps the glance she directed at his

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friend, whose eyes were riveted on the hounds, may have decided him, for he added, "I promised Mrs. Dennison I would, and if it don't bore you, I *will*."

"This way then," she exclaimed, shortening her reins; "through the gate and down by the farm-house. There's a ford in the next field, if they cross the brook. Better come with us, Mr. Maxwell," she added, as Horace set Barmecide going, with his head straight for the hounds; "I know that fence, and it's a horror!"

It *was* a horror. High, strong, and *hairy*; with an uncertainty, proving to be a wide and deep ditch, on the far side; but the young horse seemed more than willing to face it, and with hounds running hard in the very next field, Horace felt it must be now or never.

"You *are* a hunter!" said he, as Barmecide dropped his hind-legs amongst the growers, and landed lightly like a deer, with many a foot to spare. The horse too seemed much delighted with his own performance, and content with the handling of his rider.

"Hold hard, sir!" expostulated Potter, from sheer instinct and force of habit, pounding up the field a hundred yards in his rear, and four times that distance from the pack.

"Hold hard! D——n it all, hold hard!" echoed Foster, close at his huntsman's heels; adding, in a growl to himself, "It's that London chap on old Dennison's five-year-old; I trust the double-fences about Middleton Lacy will soon settle *him*!"

But the double-fences about Middleton Lacy, amongst which they found themselves in less than ten minutes, seemed to Barmecide even as beds of roses, wherein it was a pride and pleasure to disport himself. His turn of speed had served him

admirably, for, in spite of its countless hares, the hounds ran through Lower Plumpton without a turn or check of any description, and the young horse, thoroughly enjoying a line of his own, allowed himself to be ridden at a walk, trot, or gallop, with perfect calm and confidence, according to the requirements of the various obstacles he encountered. To use Maxwell's words, who expatiated freely on his merits the same day after dinner, "he was as bold as a lion, as active as a cat, and as wise as a sheep-dog."

Still the hounds kept streaming on; through Middleton Lacy, past the Lodges at Sludgeley, and so across the undulating pastures and wild open district that went by the imposing title of Middleton Lordship. The grass rode sound, the fences were easy and far apart. There was no stock in the fields; there were no boys scaring crows, no countrymen spreading manure, no yelping curs joining unbidden in the pursuit, and not a covert within five miles. It was like hunting in Paradise.

"He can't stand long before 'em at this pace," said the M.F.H., coming up with his huntsman as they rode at a light easy fence, over which Barmecide had passed without touching a twig. "They *must* pull him down on this side of Marston, for I'll swear Marston's his point."

"And the main earth open, as likely as not," answered Potter. "Dear, dear, that *would* be a bad job! Hold up, horse!"

Whitethorn *did* hold up, or he would have been on his nose in a blind grip. But though he galloped bravely on, he had already given his rider more than one hint that he would gladly welcome a check, a turn, above all, a second horse.

Relief arrived sooner than might have been

expected. Another mile brought them to the old Roman Road. Here a tinker, who had unpacked his donkey, lit his fire in a dry place, and sat down to dinner, headed the fox. The hounds flashed over the scent, checked, made their own forward cast, and lost the line.

Some of the old ones still kept their noses down, and puzzled about the tinker's encampment, but in vain.

We trust that fallacy has long since exploded which denied to a straight rider the qualities of a good sportsman. Horace Maxwell would on no account have jumped *into* the road till the hounds were *out* of it, and had fairly settled to the scent again in the next field. When Potter came up he was off his horse, exerting all his powers of observation for any hint that might be of any service to the huntsman.

"They carried it up to the fence," said he; "not a yard farther. That white hound has never left this field at all."

"That's old Abigail," observed the master, wondering what sort of a cast his huntsman would make, inclining to think it would be a bad one.

At this critical moment, to the great disturbance of the tinker's donkey, up came the waggonette—horses, servants, inmates—all in the wildest excitement and splashed to the eyes.

The coachman at Plumpton Priors had, many years before, been whipper-in with these very hounds when they were kept by old Squire Dennison, now defunct. Incapacitated by an accident for the saddle and the kennel, he had subsided to the harness-room and the box; but he dearly loved the old game still, and it was his boast, that with a pair of galloping horses and a swinging

pole, *his* ladies could see a run in any part of *his* country as well from *his* waggonette as from their own saddles. Especially did he pride himself on his knowledge of the line foxes were disposed to take from Plumpton Osiers, and he had certainly been successful on the present occasion. Even Aunt Emily condescended to compliment him on his skill, and Mrs. Foster sagely remarked, that "John," meaning her husband, "had much better have come in the carriage, for she could make him out two fields behind the hounds; and, indeed, there seemed only one gentleman with them at all."

"And that's Mr. Maxwell, on *our* young 'orse," explained the coachman, keenly interested; whereat Miss Blair's eyes brightened, and Lexley thought no woman was ever so beautiful in a dream.

Potter looked about him bewildered. Whitethorn was done to a turn. He seemed quite at a loss to guess what had become of his fox, and cast his hounds rather helplessly over the ground they had already made good. This feeble measure prolonged the check and enabled his second horse to arrive, not a moment too soon, closely followed by Annie Dennison and her cavalier.

Loud were the shouts that welcomed them from the waggonette, and the party were talking at the top of their voices, when a little suppressed cry from Miss Blair, who turned very white, directed the attention of all to Maxwell, on his face in the Roman Road, with Barmecide lying across him.

His downfall had been brought about in this wise. Abigail, a discreet and matronly old hound, with a confidence in her own sagacity but one degree removed from the enormity of "skirting," had been making independent inquiries for herself with a diligence that could not but prove successful.

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Her short, sharp notes soon brought the rest of the pack to share in her discoveries; and as they all settled once more to the line, Potter was unable to forbear a cheer, while he waved his cap to her with a "Yooi! At him! Well done, old lady! I'd trust ye with a man's life!"

Now Maxwell had no prejudice about young horses, his practice having taught him that, when ridden resolutely up to hounds, they were as temperate and sagacious as their seniors, with perhaps a turn more courage, the result of inexperience; but he was apt to forget that they should be treated *as* young horses, and not asked to engage in complicated transactions at too short notice.

With Abigail's first proclamation that her fox, though diverted from his line, was still forward and resolved to make his point, the dismounted enthusiast, vaulting into the saddle, turned short at the blind straggling fence which bounded the Roman Road, with a loose rein and a dashing carelessness that Tiptop, who was looking on, would probably have resented by a refusal, but poor Barmecide accepted with a fall.

The horse had no time to collect himself before he was caught in a wilderness of ragged, tangled branches, that pulled him down into the blind, bramble-covered ditch; and though, even at such disadvantage, he made a gallant effort to land himself and his rider in the road, it was but to flounder through a succession of deep treacherous ruts that brought him first on his head and finally on his back, with Maxwell, who sat as close as wax, completely under him. A worse rider and a clumsier horse would, in all probability, have escaped with an easier fall.

Happily help was at hand. While the ladies

trembled and burst out crying, Mortimer threw himself from the saddle, flung his rein to Annie, and rushed in to the rescue of his friend. The footman too was off the box and over his gaiters in mire with a rapidity that did him infinite credit.

These scenes are all much alike. Muddy upturned girths and stomach; bright horse-shoes kicking in the air; white breeches flashing round the fallen; a pale face peering from beneath the saddle-flaps, with a strange, uncomfortable stare that belies its brave attempt to smile; horsemen standing in their stirrups to give directions, holding the bridles of others dismounted, and gathering in to hinder or assist; a rally—a rush—a scatter—and then, scared and snorting, a horse rises out of the midst, to give himself a frightened shake, while a prostrate rider is dragged from the vicinity of his heels, more or less damaged, as the case may be.

"What is it, Mr. Mortimer?" exclaimed Annie, who was crying, as out of the rally aforesaid Percy staggered back and would have fallen, but that he caught by the splash-board of the waggonette.

"Nothing," answered Percy, grinding his teeth; "the brute kicked me getting up, that's all. I hope Horace isn't as much hurt as we thought."

But Horace, with a crushed hat and torn coat, a mass of mud from head to foot, was already in the saddle and looking which way the hounds had gone, having reassured the ladies, who were extremely anxious to make room for him in the waggonette, by declaring that he was not the least injured, rather the contrary.

"Only the wind knocked out of me, honour bright. And it was entirely my own fault. Thank you, Miss Blair; but, indeed, I am only dirty. I haven't really got a scratch."

Then looking hastily round to throw his friend a word of thanks for the prompt assistance that, perhaps, had saved his life, he leaped once more to the ground, with an exclamation that was almost an oath.

"Help! — somebody — everybody!" said he, catching the other in his arms. "Here's Mortimer fainting—a thing he never did in his life!"

Percy, sick and white, repudiated the accusation, and tried to get on his horse. Failing flagrantly, he begged everybody to go on, expressing a conviction, as he seated himself in the mud, that if they left the groom with him, and Maxwell would take care of Miss Dennison, he should be all right in ten minutes, and able to jog home. Then his head drooped, and he turned faint again from sheer pain.

In such an emergency it was Miss Blair's nature to assume the command.

"Ride back directly, Robert," said she, addressing the groom, but with a glance of inquiry at Miss Dennison. "You must find the other carriage in the turnpike-road, say what has happened, and bring it on at once. We had better all get out, except Mrs. Dennison, and wait for it; then there will be plenty of room for Mr. Mortimer, and he must be driven straight home. Mr. Maxwell, you must ride back through Middleton, and call at the doctor's house, opposite the inn, red brick — you can't mistake it—with a green railing. Tell him to come on directly. Turn to the right when you get out of the lane, and keep the turnpike-road. Middleton is three miles."

"If the doctor's not at home?" asked Maxwell.

"Tell the assistant to come instead. He's rather the best of the two. I am *so* glad you were not hurt!"

Lexley knew already why these last few words, spoken low and quick, made him wince with a strange sensation that was akin to pain.

Aunt Emily, trying to look as if she had originated these directions herself, called Horace back as he was putting his horse into a canter.

"If you can meet Mr. Dennison," said she, "tell him what has happened, and impress on him that he ought to come home without delay. It's very odd, my dear," turning to Annie, "but your uncle is sure to be miles out of the way when I want his advice."

"Which you never take," thought Annie, but wisely held her tongue.

So Mortimer was lifted into the waggonette in defiance of his protestations. Not unwillingly, after all; for though he made light of the casualty, he had learned enough of surgery in his adventurous life to be pretty sure his leg was broken above the ankle. Annie Dennison felt bound to accompany him, and her aunt, whose kindness of heart could be evoked by real suffering, arranged the cushions for his comfort with considerable ingenuity; the footman also, not without misgivings he would have perished rather than reveal, volunteered to bring the two riderless horses home. Altogether, as the sufferer himself observed, with a ghastly smile, "No fellow ever was so well picked up, and he only regretted that his unlucky accident should have prevented them all seeing the end of the run."

As it would be hopeless to expect anything but the most abridged account from Mr. Foster, who returned to dinner, it may not be irrelevant here to record the day's doings of his celebrated hounds and the select few, Nokes, Stokes, and half a dozen others, who were with them.

Abigail, having hit off the line by her own unassisted endeavours some hundred yards from where any of the rest had thought of trying, guided the pack for at least two miles over a tract of bad scenting ground, till they found themselves in the pastures above Spinnithorne. Here, in consequence of the loss of time, for which the tinker in the Roman Road was answerable, another check ensued, which might have proved fatal, but that Foster, with an eye like a hawk, viewed the fox stealing through an orchard belonging to that Miss Lovelace whose claims for dead poultry it was the business of his life to assuage. Potter, riding a fresh horse, capped them on quicker than usual, and had the satisfaction of seeing his hounds race across three or four large enclosures, turn short down the side of a double hedgerow, and run fairly into their fox at the bottom of a deep dry ditch that surrounded a plantation on Mr. Screwman's farm, full of rabbit-burrows, many of which were of a size that might afford sanctuary to a wolf.

"Who — whoop! Tear him, old bitch!" he exclaimed, throwing himself from his horse and diving for the carcase, on which Abigail had fastened with most tenacious fangs. "You'll have *your* share, whoever goes without. Who—whoop!" he added, cutting off mask, brush and pads, while he looked up in Foster's grim face, now radiant with delight.

"An old dog-fox, sir, and as tough as shoe-leather. It's a good job he didn't get in among them there rabbit-spouts afore they had hold on him. Worry, worry, worry! Here puppies! Vaulter! Vanity! Dexterous! Worry—worry—worry! Who—whoop!"

And Mr. Foster entered the day's sport in his

diary with an emphatic "Good," as fifty minutes—two checks—a seven mile point—and a kill in the open; while Farmer Mountain, who weighed eighteen stone, and stuck to the high-road like a man, thereby arriving before the remnants of the fox had entirely disappeared, swore it was the best gallop he ever saw in his life.

CHAPTER VI

MAN-EATERS

AFTER a storm comes a calm. It is a fortnight since the good run from Plumpton Osiers, and in less than an hour the gong will sound for luncheon at the Priors. Meantime peace and quiet pervade the blue drawing-room in which Percy Mortimer and his broken leg are established. The Middleton doctor has reduced the fracture, as he calls it; a process the sufferer renders by the expression "spliced it where it was sprung"; the bone is knitting, and the patient going on favourably. Indeed, Percy, as he often boasts, is an excellent subject for surgical operations. His constitution is healthy, his temperament easy and somewhat lethargic. He possesses plenty of courage, and derives a certain amusement from such experiments as those to which he is now subjected, even when made on his own person. He has lived in so many strange scenes and places, has so often been prostrated by accident or illness—with a screen of branches for a roof, a tattered blanket and weather-worn saddle for bedding, and an Indian squaw or a swarthy Afghan for nurse—that to be laid up in this luxurious drawing-room, with books and newspapers at hand, hot-house flowers on the table, and every female creature in the house his devoted slave, seems a positive luxury and delight.

His eye travels lazily round till it rests on the figure of Annie Dennison, drawing at the window, but looking up every now and then with a dreamy, abstracted air, suggestive of her occupation, and by no means unbecoming to a pretty woman.

It has just struck him that to have such a companion about one every day, even when no longer held by the leg on a drawing-room sofa, might be worth the sacrifice of many bachelor comforts and pleasures, which no man is better able to appreciate, and of which no man in his time has made better use.

Physical pain, especially when borne without complaint, seldom fails to win a woman's sympathies and excite her interest. Annie established herself from the first as head nurse to Mr. Mortimer, and in a very few days it seems the most natural thing in the world that his sofa should be wheeled into the blue drawing-room, and that he should spend the morning *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Dennison.

Far be it from me to profess dissent from any article of faith cherished by that order of fire-worshippers who scorch, if they do not entirely consume, their own hearts on an altar of self-immolation. No doubt the true believer "drags at each remove a lengthening chain." No doubt "absence" (if not too prolonged) "makes the heart grow fonder," and the ideal reigns perhaps most triumphantly when there is nothing present to destroy his or her ideality. But *gutta cavat lapidem:* constant dropping wears away a stone; constant flirtation saps the character while it deteriorates the brain. Repeated confidences kindle into sympathy—the tow and tinder of which men and women are proverbially composed, only wait a chance spark, a rising breeze, to become a bonfire, and propinquity is perhaps the most combustible

ingredient of all. Then, even if the heart remain steady, the fancy is sadly apt to stray, and one step at least is taken on that downward path which runs in a steeper incline at every inch, and hurries us, before we know where we are, to the very bottom of the hill.

Percy Mortimer always boasted that he could stop and put on the drag-chain whenever he chose. He had often been in love, but never, as yet, with only one woman at a time; and believed himself, as he was believed by his friends, to be incapable of committing what he and they considered the crowning imprudence of matrimony. His mother, his aunts, all his female relations, persistently recommended the institution, even while they were prepared to revile and vituperate any lady who should propose herself as a candidate for its advantages, and professed themselves, as no doubt they felt, eager to receive "dear Percy's" wife with open arms—an expression best understood by those who have had most experience of the cordiality that exists between relations by marriage.

But "dear Percy" did not see it. He got on very well as he was—could tolerate his own society better than that of people who bored him, liked his own way, his own pursuits and amusements, his own friends, married and single, his horses, his cigar—above all, his liberty. To-day, for the first time, he began to think there might be something in life better than all these.

"Turn your head a little towards the fireplace, Mr. Mortimer," said Annie, from the window. "I've rubbed your nose out three times, and a very provoking nose it is. Never mind! don't move, if it hurts you, *please*."

"Most certainly *not*!" answered Percy, laugh-

ing. "But turning one's head does not necessarily give one a pain in the leg. Will that do? Make a good nose of it, Miss Dennison—art should be nature idealised, not copied. On the aquiline, if you please, as much as possible, and off the snub. Have you done the tiger?"

"I'm coming to him directly I've straightened your nose," said the artist, whose talent lay chiefly in caricature. "But was it a *true* story, Mr. Mortimer? Uncle John made my blood run cold when he described how the creature stood over you waving its cruel tail like a cat with a mouse. Poor mouse! What a moment it must have been! Tell me all about it from beginning to end. I shall draw it as well again if you do."

"There's not much to tell, only the mouse had a squeak for it. Do you know what a *shekarry* is?"

"Not the least. The only Indian word I know is *bungalow*, and I haven't an idea what it means. Now I've begun the tiger's back. How do their stripes go? The long way of the skirt, or across it? Don't move your head. Tell me exactly how it happened, without any Indian words, whilst I finish his tail."

"Well, I was at a station—never mind where—what we call up-country, staying with a very good fellow, an indigo-planter with one eye. Did you ever see an indigo-planter? No? Well, you've seen a fellow with one eye, and that's near enough. One day after *tiffin*"—

"Stop. What's *tiffin*? Don't say that again."

"After luncheon, then, a native made his appearance in a state of dismay and trepidation, to tell us that his relatives, his belongings, his entire village, were in terror of their lives from the depredations of a man-eater."

"That's an Indian word, I'm sure. Don't take your eyes off the chimney-piece, and confine your narrative to plain English."

"Man-eater *is* plain English; I've seen lots of them in London, and elsewhere, with striped dresses, and other tiger-like qualifications. For fifteen miles round, it seemed, the beast kept everybody in alarm, and, according to the native's account, had eaten within the month seven children, a water-carrier, and a tough old Hindoo woman, the speaker's grandmother. My friend, who was drinking brandy *paw*,—brandy and water, I mean,—thought the story probable enough, and, in short, being a resolute fellow, determined to lie in wait at a certain spot the beast frequented, next morning at daybreak, and keep his eyes open."

"His *one* eye open, if you please," interposed the young lady. "I'm sketching him doing it. If this improbable story really be true, let us have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing *but* the truth, Mr. Mortimer."

"You must draw him with a good deal of stomach then, and very thin legs," continued Percy; "and the eye that *is* open ought to be as sharp as a needle. He made all his arrangements overnight, ordered everything to be ready—guns, fellows to carry them, an elephant to take us to the ground, etc., and at four in the morning we settled comfortably to our coffee, for of course I said I'd go with him."

"Of course you did, and I think it was very foolish—no, I don't! I think you were quite right."

"'Can you draw a bead?' said my friend as soon as we got fairly under weigh. 'You must shoot to an inch, when you go out to kill a tiger on foot. He's not like a pheasant in Norfolk, you know. If you're at all uncertain, you had better remain with

the elephant. I should be sorry for you to risk your life in the kind of sport we are likely to have to-day.'

"Of course I swore I could shoot like Colonel Ross; and so, though I was in a blue funk, I resolved to do my best, and put a bold face on it, while the elephant tramped steadily on."

"Had the elephant tusks?" interrupted Miss Annie. "I'm putting it in the background."

"Tusks! Of course it had, and horns too," answered Percy, laughing. "Well, Miss Dennison, you'll hardly believe it, but no sooner were we in sight of the *tope*—the clump of trees that was to guide us—than we came upon the beast's track, printed off quite fresh in the clay, by a water spring. We had no doubt then of his size, or the shape of his claws. My friend's one eye blazed like a lamp.

"'We'll get down here,' said he, 'and leave the elephant to take us back again.' I only hoped the elephant's load might not be lightened for its homeward journey.

"We placed ourselves in a narrow pass, such as you would almost call a ride in a woodland here, waiting till the beaters should have driven up to us. Notwithstanding the diabolical row they made, I swear I could hear my heart beat. The indigo-planter, however, seemed as cool as was compatible with a temperature of ninety degrees Fahrenheit in the shade."

Miss Dennison had laid her pencils down and was looking at him, as Desdemona (before marriage) looked at Othello.

"Presently I felt his hand on my shoulder. 'Right in front of you,' he whispered. 'Twenty yards, not an inch farther. You'll see his head when he moves.'

"But when you come to paint that masterly

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sketch, Miss Dennison, please don't forget that a tiger's dress, as you call it, matches in colour the jungle he frequents. In the gaudy tawny and orange hues that surrounded me I could make out nothing, positively nothing, till I fancied the reeds began to shake.

"'Steady,' whispered one-eye, who was born a Scotchman, and under strong excitement spoke the language still. 'Tak' time, man! Now! give it him.'

"Whether it was the noise the beaters made, or the roar of the animal, or both combined, I cannot say, but such a fearful row I never heard in my life as at that moment. The reeds seemed to divide of themselves, and out rushed a beast as big as a donkey, making straight towards me, with a sleek round head as broad as a bull's.

"I took the best aim I could at his mouth, and let him have an eleven-bore ball crash into the very middle of it."

"Oh, Mr. Mortimer! How could you?"

"How *couldn't* I, you mean. Instead of his tumbling headlong at my feet, as I fully expected, I heard a rush and singing in my ears, a long dark body seemed to shoot between me and the sun. I felt something like an electric shock, only stronger, and I found myself half stunned, half paralysed, but not so frightened as I should have thought, lying on my back, with a wide hairy chest astride over mine, and a ton of weight driving spikes through my left arm as it pinned me to the ground.

"He said I didn't faint; but the next thing I remember was my friend giving me brandy, and the tiger stretched out stone dead three or four yards off. What really happened was this. When the beast came at me out of the jungle I shot him, as I meant to do, in a vital place; but I fancy I must

have aimed an inch too low, for I only broke his jaw. In two bounds he was on me, and if I had been alone, why, I should never have inflicted on you so long a story in this pretty drawing-room. But the indigo-planter was as cool a hand and as good a sportsman as ever sat in a howdah. He knew the nature of the beast was so far cat-like that it would gloat for an instant over its victim before dealing the fatal buffet, and of that instant he took advantage. With a deliberate and deadly aim he finished it up by a double shot through the spine. There was not a moment to spare, and, as I said before, I think you must allow the mouse had a squeak for it."

Annie felt more interested than she cared to own, so applied herself sedulously to her drawing, while she asked—

"And what became of the Hindoo—the person whose grandmother was eaten by the tiger?"

"The Hindoo was like other Hindoos, very grateful and demonstrative, with a shade of polite insincerity. His ideas on the subject of tigers, as I gathered from my friend, were most remarkable. Had the last shot not killed the tiger, in which case the tiger must assuredly have killed me, nothing would have persuaded this intelligent native but that my spirit was destined to accompany the animal in its excursions, and assist it to obtain its prey. Fancy *me*, disembodied, if you can, leading a tiger about in a leash, like Una with the lion! That *would* be a subject for a sketch—Miss Dennison, won't you try it?"

Annie shook her head. "I don't like joking about these horrors," said she; "but you can't mean that the natives seriously believe such absurdities?"

"I will only tell you what the old gentleman

positively assured us happened in his own case, some years before. His eldest son had been killed by a tiger, and partly eaten, when the brute was disturbed and driven away from its meal. The father, armed with a rusty matchlock, as long as himself, climbed into a tree at night, resolved to watch the body, and have a shot at the beast when it returned, as it certainly would, for another supper off his boy. He had not long to wait. The tiger stole out of the jungle, and came gliding into the moonlight, when, just as the weapon covered a vital spot, he whisked round and slipped into the covert again. The corpse, sitting upright, was nodding at the tree on which the avenger had perched himself, and its friendly warning had not been in vain. The Hindoo then came down and fastened the boy's body to the ground. Again he watched, and again the tiger made his appearance, but one of the corpse's hands was free, and that hand pointed faithfully towards the post of danger, with the same result as before. The undefeated old gentleman came down, nevertheless, once more, and pinned his boy's body secure to the earth, so that it could not move a limb. His patience and perseverance were rewarded. The tiger emerged a third time, and finished a hasty morsel with an ounce of lead in his brain. The man stuck to the truth of his story with the utmost confidence. A great English *sahib* had bought the tiger's skin, and it was well known in Mysore and the adjacent districts that such was the nature of the man-eater and the destiny of his victim. Miss Dennison, have you finished your sketch?"

"I should like to have seen all you have, Mr. Mortimer," said the young lady, colouring her tiger with some sepia and the feather-end of a pen.

"Gentlemen have a great advantage over ladies. They go about the world seeing and doing things, while we can only sit at home and—draw."

He looked up. The last word was not quite what he expected. Her head was bent over her colour-box, and he could not help thinking what a beautiful sketch she herself would make in that attitude, if only she could be transferred to cardboard or canvas. Something whispered, "Why not become possessor of the original? You have money; you are neither old nor ugly; your manners are pleasant; your position undeniable. Surely you have only got to ask and have." But perhaps the assumed facility of the transaction lessened its charm, and Percy felt he was not yet so far gone but that he could balance calmly the *pros* and *cons* of that irrevocable plunge, which for the first time in his life he contemplated the possibility of making.

She little thought what a push she gave him towards the brink by her innocent question, asked, nevertheless, with a faint increase of colour in her cheek—

"Do you know if Mr. Maxwell is expected to-day? He said he should come down again to see how you were getting on."

Now Horace Maxwell, who remained at the Priors to watch his friend's recovery for nearly a week after the accident of which he was the innocent cause, had carried with him to London the good wishes of everybody in the house. Even Aunt Emily declared that he showed more feeling than she could have expected from any young man of the present day, while the skill with which he rode Barmecide up to their joint catastrophe, constituted him a prime favourite with Uncle John.

Miss Blair had been prepared to like him from the first, and her conviction that her influence over him was less than she expected, in no way decreased her partiality. She had never before any difficulty in such matters, but here was one with whom she began swimmingly, and never advanced a step. She reflected, she wondered, she watched. She could not make out whether he was taken by Miss Dennison or not.

And Annie, who asked herself the very same question, had decided, with more prudence than young ladies generally possess, that it must never be answered, one way or the other. Mr. Maxwell was *nice*, no doubt. None of her partners or male friends had ever been so nice. More of a man of the world than Lexley, who besides had become very odd and altered of late. Better looking than Mortimer; and altogether, as it seemed to her, belonging to a different class of beings from honest Nokes and Stokes, gone back to duty in their barracks. But he was not a marrying man. Some instinct, usually dormant in the breast of woman till she becomes a chaperon, had warned Annie that his pleasant glances, his bright smiles, were simply the frank tribute of one who had nothing else to offer. She did not forget an occasion when she found him in the billiard-room holding a confidential conversation with Miss Blair. They changed colour, she was sure, when she opened the door. Miss Dennison was not much given to analysing her feelings, or she might have felt alarmed at certain pangs of jealousy occasioned by the confusion of the gentleman, and the disinclination she felt afterwards for the society of the lady.

Still, though one never means, and don't even want, to marry a man, one can appreciate his good

qualities, be glad that he should visit one, and ask his friend, not without a blush, when one is likely to see him again.

"He talked of to-day," answered Percy, moving his sound leg uneasily on the sofa; "but that's no reason he should come. People cannot tear themselves away from the delights of London. Look at the Pikes—promised faithfully, threw everybody over, and never appeared at all."

"You say that on purpose to make me angry," exclaimed Annie. "You know that she is my dearest friend, and the General is simply my idol. But how could they come when baby was ill? It is brutal to think of it."

"Babies never *ought* to be ill," was his answer. "They never are, when properly brought up. Look at savages: I lived with a tribe once who turned their children out of their lodges directly they were weaned. The weakly died off, the strong grew up, and everybody was satisfied. Don't go, Miss Dennison; I'm not such an ogre as you think."

"I *must* go," replied Annie; "but I'll tidy you up first. Luncheon will be ready in five minutes, and most of the sepia for your tiger's stripes has come off on my hands. Yes, I don't mind showing you the sketch, but you must promise not to bounce about and fidget with the sofa-cushions. You're not nearly so good a patient as you were, Mr. Mortimer. I suppose that means you are getting better."

"It means I have too kind a nurse," replied Percy, looking gratefully in the girl's face, while she put her half-finished sketch into his hand.

"I'll do it," he thought; "hang me if I won't!" Then he reflected on the great disadvantage at which a suitor is placed when fastened down to the

sofa by a broken leg. Had the lady been a person of experience—a widow, for instance, or a London girl of many seasons' practice, or even Miss Blair, as he had lately learned to call her—the helplessness of his attitude would have been rather in his favour. Through all natures seems to prevail the law of mechanics, that "action and reaction are equal and contrary." In love and in business alike, each seems prepared to advance in proportion as the other recedes, until some imaginary line is reached at which people come to an understanding and conclude the transaction. But such mutual accommodation can only be calculated with certainty when both are experienced dealers, well acquainted with the value of their wares. In the present instance Percy thought it more than probable that anything like a premature declaration would put Miss Dennison to a flight he would be powerless to check by the exercise of certain gentle yet resolute measures that his experience taught him produced very soothing results. To be left on a sofa, with a half-finished offer on his lips, that could only be completed at a young lady's pleasure, when, where, and how she would? Not if he knew it! Into so thoroughly false a position Mortimer would be the last man on earth to blunder; and so, instead of seizing the pretty hand that held the sketch and pressing it to his lips, he contented himself with a kindly glance into the pretty face, and a request that he might become the proud possessor of the picture when complete.

"I don't know," said Annie. "You'll hang it up somewhere, and laugh at it with your bachelor-friends."

"On the contrary, I shall keep it under lock and key, in a portfolio, and only look at it when I feel

I want taking down a peg. You are strong in caricature, Miss Dennison, but you are *not* merciful. Am I really so ugly as that?"

"India is very unbecoming, I have been told," answered Annie demurely. "I never saw you there, you know, so I have drawn on my imagination."

"And drawn *from* it to some purpose, it seems. Well, it's lucky we cannot see ourselves as others see us. The tiger is capital. Is he drawn from the imagination too?"

"Oh no! I've seen *him* at the Zoological."

"Why don't you see *me* at the Zoological? I know all the keepers, and a good many of the beasts. Won't you come to the Zoo with me, some day, when we get back to London?"

"I don't know," said Annie again. "I must really go and wash my hands now. The gong will sound in five minutes."

"First tell me who that is coming up the avenue. I can just see a hat between the cedars."

He seemed desirous to prolong the conversation. It was so pleasant to have her there all to himself. In the afternoon, of course, she would go out walking, or riding, or driving; and their *tête-à-tête* would be broken up for the rest of the day.

"It's Mr. Lexley," answered Annie. "He often comes to luncheon now, and walks the whole way—eleven miles! Mr. Mortimer, do *you* know"—

"Do I know *what*?"

"It's very ridiculous, of course, but I can't help thinking that Mr. Lexley is rather inclined to—to like somebody *here*."

"Meaning Miss Dennison?"

She flushed up. "Not meaning Miss Dennison the least. Somebody very different from Miss Dennison."

"You can't mean *Mrs.* Dennison!" he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows in affected horror. "And a clergyman, too! How shocking!"

"I am serious," she answered, though she could not help laughing, "which *you* never are for five minutes, even with a broken leg. Of course he likes Aunt Emily and all of us very much, but I don't fancy he would walk two-and-twenty miles, between breakfast and dinner, to see anybody on earth but Miss Blair. Mr. Mortimer, I am convinced you can tell me—who *is* Miss Blair?"

She did not fail to notice his embarrassment, and the lame way in which he tried to evade her question.

"A friend of your aunt's, I fancy. A very old friend of Mrs. Dennison; that is why she is here so much."

"But you have known her a long time? She said so herself, the night before last."

"I have met her abroad."

"Where?"

He escaped into generalities. "Oh, everywhere abroad. She's been knocking about over the whole of abroad, and so have I."

"Was she in society? I don't mean in China or the Sandwich Islands, or any of those out-of-the-way places, but in Paris and Vienna and Cannes?"

"Oh yes; I believe so. But I am not a very good judge; I have never thought much about her. I daresay you have formed your own opinion, and it's far more likely to be right than mine."

"I daresay I have," replied Annie, looking thoughtfully at her sketch. "*My* opinion is that she's a man-eater! There! What shall I send you in for luncheon?"

CHAPTER VII

SEEKING REST

LEVEN miles, heel and toe, through every variety of scenery, by breezy common, woodland path, devious bridle-road, and bottomless by-lane, ought to give anybody an appetite ; yet it was remarked, even by the servants who waited, that when Mr. Lexley came to luncheon at the Priors he ate less than the most delicate lady who sat at table. The truth is, Lexley was hit ; hard hit as a man is once in a lifetime : he gets over it, and perhaps when the wound is healed it has done him no great harm, though we may be sure it has taught him not to jest at scars ; but, in the meantime, he becomes an object of pity, or of envy, according to the creed we hold. Who would not wish his faculties to be so sharpened that the mere sigh of a breeze thrills like music to his heart—the very scent of a flower rises like intoxication to his brain ? But at the same time who would wish his happiness to be so dependent on the caprices of another, that a word, a look, a gesture, perhaps unintentional, have power to inflict on him nights of wakefulness and days of woe ? It is good to take life as it comes, shrinking

in no way from its responsibilities, accepting its pleasures, setting our teeth against its pains; but there is a cup at which the wise man is content to wet his lips and so put it down, knowing better than to drain it, for surely *plus aloes quam mellis habet.* Liquid fire and bitter poison are in its dregs.

The first night he had ever seen her, the night he heard her play, Algernon Lexley told himself that here was the woman who for him could make earth a paradise. The next two days only convinced him that without her life must henceforth be a blank, and that to win her no sacrifice would be too costly, no price too high. When he had been twenty-four hours in his parsonage a reaction set in. How should a mere country curate, he thought, aspire to such a paragon as this? Everybody in like plight has felt with Helena—

> "It were all one
> As I should love a bright particular star
> And think to wed it."

And surely it is better so. Youth is the period of illusion and of effort. There is plenty of time in after-life to find out that the "particular star" is a farthing rushlight, and that *le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle.*

Algernon Lexley struggled hard for a day and a night; read Greek; dug in his garden; visited every old woman in the parish; and walked after dinner in the dark so far and so fast that he went to bed and slept sound for sheer weariness. Next morning he felt in better spirits, but more in love than ever. That day and many days after, scarcely at decorous intervals, he found himself dropping in to luncheon at the Priors—to get the character of a village schoolmistress, to ask Aunt Emily the price of her church harmonium, to consult works of

divinity in Uncle John's library, more than once without any excuse at all. Each time he went full of hope; each time he returned despondent and self-abased, smarting under the fear that he had been ridiculous, stung by misgivings as to his dress, his manners, his personal appearance; tortured by a thousand unreal doubts and causeless anxieties, while he extracted with perverse ingenuity matter for sorrow, resentment, despair, from the common greetings of politeness, the established usages of society. Altogether he was in a most uncomfortable state, attributed by himself to the charms of Miss Blair, though perhaps the student of human nature would have considered her merely as a vehicle for the imparting of a disease to which the young man's system was predisposed. Had she stayed away a little longer he would probably have taken to worship Miss Dennison; but there is a fatality in these things, and he became a fool about Laura Blair. Look at him now, and say if it is not a pity. A spare, athletic figure coming up the avenue with swift strides, that decrease visibly in speed and scope as they approach the house. Eleven miles from door to door, and it is scarcely two hours and a half since he left his own; yet, until he came in sight of those windows his breath had never quickened, nor had a drop of moisture risen on his brow. Without being handsome it is a prepossessing face, white and anxious though it has turned in the last minute. The dark eyes show fire, energy, and an immensity of faith. There is ideality in the brow; firmness in the jaw, with its full black whiskers; and in the thin, clean-shaven, flexible lips a sad capability of suffering, that can be kept down and hidden beneath a smile.

He does not look like a man deficient in courage,

yet he wavers, as cowards do, and comes on with a rush at the last moment to ring the door-bell.

"Is Miss—Mrs. Dennison at home?" says he, in a shaking voice, while he envies the cool self-respect of the footman who confronts him.

"Luncheon has just gone in," replies that functionary, who dined comfortably an hour ago. "Will you please to step this way, sir?"

This way means straight into the dining-room, and he is fast losing his head. The old squire, in scarlet coat and hunting-cap, seems to reel and waver on the canvas as if he was alive and inebriated.

Mrs. Dennison receives him coldly. That is her way, and discourages him only a little; he shakes hands with her nevertheless, with Annie, with the rector's daughters, with their brother from Marlborough College, whom he never met before; lastly, with Miss Blair, whom he has seen, though he dared not look at her, ever since he came into the room.

Did she, or did she not, return the pressure of his clasp ever such a little? He fancies she did, and immediately his eye brightens, his courage rises, his colour returns. He becomes, on the instant, a bolder, bigger, and a handsomer man. She continues to eat her chicken, pale, unmoved, beautiful like the goddess of night. Will she ever eat chickens roasted in his kitchen, carved at his table? If he could but summon up courage he would ask her this afternoon.

The malady is intermittent. He was in the hot fit now; the cold would follow in due course. There fell a silence while the butler offered him sherry. He *must* say something, so "he hoped Mr. Dennison was well. He had come over to see him about their road-rate."

"And walked all the way?" asked Annie, who knew he did, but whom some imp of mischief prompted to assume the aggressive.

"All the way, Miss Dennison," he replied. "It's not very far — scarcely eleven miles, and through a beautiful country. I like the walk so much."

Miss Blair happened to look up, and their eyes met. Annie felt provoked, she admitted it afterwards, and inclined to be spiteful with both.

"Uncle John ought to be very much flattered," said she. "Dear old thing! I wonder if anybody else would walk eleven miles to see him, or if he is *really* the great attraction here?"

Lexley turned scarlet. Miss Blair pitied him from her heart. She knew he was enduring martyrdom for her sake, and would have borne her share willingly if she could. Poor fellow! how gentle he was, how unexacting, and how true! Would that other man, amusing himself in London, walk eleven miles and back, only to say "How d'ye do?"? Not he! What a pity they were so unlike! In the meantime she advanced gallantly in support. "Dear Miss Dennison, you are forgetting another attraction in the next room. While we are saying pleasant things to each other, Mr. Mortimer is perishing with hunger. I thought *you* had established yourself as his nurse, for good and all."

Miss Blair had a quiet, incisive way of speaking that caused every syllable to ring clear and distinct, like the high notes of a pianoforte.

Annie coloured and bit her lip. "Somebody must take care of him," said she, "and of course it's lonely for him now. Everyone seemed attentive enough while Mr. Maxwell remained."

The return was fairly intended. Miss Blair

had indeed shown greater commiseration for the sufferer, had frequented the blue drawing-room more assiduously, so long as it was enlivened by the presence of his friend.

"Well, he's coming back to-day," she replied with provoking calmness, as if it were a law of nature that she should know and regulate his movements.

Annie had lost her temper, and forgotten her manners.

"Who told you so?" said she. "Has he been writing to you? I daresay he *has*."

Lexley felt very uncomfortable. Could his idol then be carrying on a correspondence with another? and that other such a rival as his old schoolfellow, whom, however, he had never before considered dangerous as a ladies' man. In a second flashed on his brain the programme of his future, dating from that very afternoon. An authorised interview—for diffidence would henceforth be swamped in despair—with the mistress of his destiny—an avowal of life-long adoration, in spite of her confession that she was promised elsewhere—an eternal farewell—a letter to the Bishop, resigning his preferment, and a few short years of hardship, labour, and adventure amongst the Feejee Islanders (to whose chiefs, by the way, Mr. Mortimer could give him plenty of introductions), or other the most inconvertible of the heathen, to conclude with an early death and a missionary's unknown grave. These cheerful anticipations were interrupted by the harsh voice of Aunt Emily, who, watching her opportunity, was not sorry for an occasion of snubbing her niece.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Annie. If Mr. Maxwell had altered his plans he would have written to me, certainly not to Miss Blair, and I

should hope not to you. Young ladies say such odd things in these days. I never can make out whether they are lamentably bold, or only lamentably silly."

"Hope for the best, aunt," replied Miss Dennison, whose ill-humours never lasted above a minute. "I'd rather be bold than silly. In the meantime, I shall take Mr. Mortimer his chicken. Thanks, Miss Blair, he likes it smothered in bread sauce."

And as the getting up of a single partridge causes the whole covey to rise, a general move was the result of Annie's disappearance on her benevolent errand.

At this juncture did Aunt Emily win the young clergyman's eternal gratitude and goodwill. "If you want to see the harmonium," said she, "it's in the Sunday School. The schoolroom's locked, and the shoemaker has the keys. You'll never find his house if you don't know it, but Laura talked of going into the village this afternoon, and I daresay she will be good enough to show you the way. If you have anything to say to Mr. Dennison you'd better come back to tea."

So in less than ten minutes he was pacing a garden walk between the laurels side by side with Laura Blair.

He was no fool, though foolishly in love. As he took in with a side-glance the enchanting figure of his companion, he could not but admit that from the saucy feather in her little perched-up hat, to the tips of her neat walking-boots, she was very different from his ideal of a clergyman's wife. Right or wrong, it only made him the more determined to win her. No other woman surely was steeped in such an atmosphere of beauty—no other woman's gloves fitted so well; and he had never yet seen

lockets and bracelets so becoming to the wearer. For him she seemed, as the Frenchman said, *plus femme que les autres.* That made the whole secret. His own difficulty was how to begin.

They walked on in silence. She, too, revolved many things in her mind. It is not to be supposed that she was blind to such devotion as even a schoolgirl must have detected; and, like all women who have been accustomed to it, admiration was gratifying for its own sake. Of course, the homage of Mr. Wright pleases best, but in that gentleman's absence the adoration of Monsieur un Tel is sufficiently acceptable on the principle that one must wear mosaic if unable to obtain real gold. She had seen a great deal of the article, both false and true; quite enough to value it when genuine and to crave for it when artificial and adapted only for temporary use. Besides, with all her courage, all her confidence, she was in this respect a very woman—it tired her to stand alone. She longed for a helper, an adviser—somebody to lean on, consult, contradict, and, in certain abnormal instances, to obey.

She walked on, I say, in silence, as a winner can afford to do. The skilful angler allows her fish to play its foolish self, till, exhausted with splashing and struggling, she can land it without the line cutting her fingers or the water wetting her dress. The fish too was mute, but not for long.

"*Did* Maxwell really write to you, Miss Blair?" said he, still savouring the bitter drop in a cup that might have been so sweet.

"Why should he not?" she replied, lifting her large grey eyes to his with that rare smile of which she well knew the effect. "Would you rather he didn't?"

He often asked himself afterwards why, with

such an opening, he had not dashed boldly in. Perhaps she thoroughly realised her power when he blushed, stammered, and answered—if answer it could be called—

"He's an old friend of mine, you know. I was at school with him long ago. I—I wonder he didn't write to *me*."

"Suppose he never wrote at all?" said she, laughing outright.

He drew a long breath of intense relief, while she wondered how men could be so thick-witted, so much easier to manage than the beasts of the field.

Again they walked on in silence, and now they were nearing the wicket in the park paling through which they must emerge on the publicity of the village. His hands were cold, his throat was dry, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. "Miss Blair," said he, in a faint, thick voice; and for the life of him he could not get out another syllable.

"Well, Mr. Lexley?"

How could she remain so cool and calm while he felt literally choking with emotion? It stung him just enough to give him courage. Loosening his neckcloth and squaring his shoulders, he stood up like a man and looked her in the face.

"He certainly has a good figure," she said to herself, "and he's not so ugly as I thought. I hope he isn't going to ask me to marry him, for I feel as if I might almost say 'Yes.'"

"Miss Blair," he repeated, "will you forgive me for what I am going to tell you? I want you to—to—I don't know how to say it; I never said such a thing to anybody before."

"That is complimentary," she said, half pitying, half mocking his agitation; "complimentary, but not reassuring."

"I want to make you understand—to tell you—of course, it's no use—of course, I feel it's hopeless; but—but—Miss Blair, I never saw anybody like you. I never admired anybody so much, nor cared for anybody before. Couldn't you—I don't mean now, but at a future time when you know me better—couldn't you care for me in return, and give me hope that at last you would—would look on me with some little regard?"

He took her hand and was going to press it to his lips, had she not drawn it hastily away, admitting to herself, while she contrasted this with other declarations she had received of a like nature, that, considering he was so inexperienced, he had done it remarkably well.

"Mr. Lexley," said she, perfectly calm and composed, "am I to understand that you are asking me to be your wife?"

"I know I might as well expect an angel to come down from heaven and marry me, but that is my desire," he answered, unconsciously borrowing from the Baptismal Service his energetic affirmative.

"And do you know *who* I am—*what* I am—how and where all my previous life has been spent, till you met me here for the first time, only a fortnight ago, Mr. Lexley—a fortnight yesterday?"

"Do you remember it?" he exclaimed eagerly. "I could tell you every word you said that night. It was the beginning of a new life to *me*!—whether for happiness or misery, it remains with you to decide. I have staked everything on your answer. Oh, Miss Blair, I could wait for years—I could go through fire and water—I could bear anything—except to give you up!"

"You *do* love me, I think," she said very softly, but keeping at arm's length the while. "Listen,

Mr. Lexley. You are younger than I am—younger in years, very much younger in knowledge of the world. Have you considered what it is to marry a woman without fortune, without position, without one single social advantage except a certain comeliness in your eyes, that will be faded long before you are past your prime? Have you ever thought of what your friends would say—your relations, your own parish, and the world in general?"

"I have considered nothing, I have calculated nothing, I have thought of nothing but *you*," he answered impetuously. "It is no question of *me*, but of yourself. The whole world might turn its back and welcome, if I saw the least chance of a kind word and a smile from *you* once a week."

Most women are gamblers at heart. Even if they abstain from defying chance on their own account, there are few but acknowledge the charm of recklessness in the other sex, and a man is pretty sure to find favour in their eyes whom they see risking his all at heavy disadvantage because they themselves are the prize. Laura Blair was no exception to the general rule. The most rational argument, the wisest forethought, would have made far less way in her good graces than Lexley's tumultuous declaration that he was ready and willing to pay any price for the toy he coveted, without even inquiring what it was worth. The unaccustomed tears sprang to her eyes, but she sent them back with an effort; and though her lip quivered, her voice was perfectly steady while she spoke.

"Mr. Lexley," said she, "you have paid me a very high compliment—one that I do not deserve. Hush! do not interrupt me: I repeat, one that I do not deserve. No, I don't hate you; I like you

—yes, very much. But that is not the question. Let go my hand; if you choose to take it after you have heard me out—well, perhaps I may consider the matter you mentioned just now. And yet it seems impossible—impossible! Yes, I know all that. I believe you—I *do* from my heart. But still, I say, it ought to be *impossible*. Now listen to me. You never smoke, do you? If you did, I would ask you to light a cigar while I make my little statement. Never mind; promise to be a good boy and hold your tongue. Now, Mr. Lexley, this must be in the strictest confidence as between man and man."

"Wait a moment," he replied, stopping short, for they were walking up and down where the path was thickly screened by laurels. "Before you begin, let me say one word. I do not care what disclosures you make. I love you just the same. If it were possible that your past life had been worse than any convict's in prison, I should love you just the same. Even if you were married already," he added in a trembling voice, "it would break my heart, and I would never see you again; but I should love you just the same!"

A faint colour tinged the delicate cheek he had often compared to the inner petals of a white rose, and the face he worshipped glowed for a moment with a rush of pride, qualified by pity, astonishment, and something like self-reproach.

"Married," she repeated. "You have hit upon the exact truth. I have been married, Mr. Lexley. No; you needn't break your heart and fly the country for fear of seeing me again. I said I *have* been married. Nobody can regret it more than myself. Now, do you understand how foolish you are? There are scores of girls in society who would love you very dearly, who would make excellent

wives, any one of whom I am sure you might have for asking, and everybody would say you had chosen wisely and well."

"I had rather choose for myself," said he, looking rapturously in her face, for his hopes rose with the increasing kindness of her tone. "I *have* chosen my queen; and whenever she comes she shall find me ready, if I have to wait all my life and be disappointed at the end."

"Don't say that," she answered with a sigh. "You deserve a better fate. If there were more men like you in the world there would be more good women. As it is, there are plenty bad of both sexes, and I think fortune has thrown me among some of the worst. My father was not a good man, Mr. Lexley, though I have heard he was a good officer. He broke my mother's heart. I can remember when I was a little thing, how she used to cry when she came to wish me good-night. After she died I was sent away from home to stay with one relation after another, and whilst he lived I don't think I saw him half a dozen times again. Poor mother! How well I remember her. There is a miniature of her in my dressing-case upstairs. Mr. Lexley, you have a kind heart—I will show it you."

"Was she like you?" he asked.

"In features, yes," she replied, smiling rather sadly. "In disposition, very different, and very far superior. My mother was one of the best women that ever lived, and I sometimes think I am capable of being one of the worst! On her deathbed she urged my father to marry a young lady to whom she believed he was attached, and who, I learnt afterwards, received his attentions under the impression that he was a single man. He cared for

her as little as for anybody else in the world, except Colonel Blair, but he was rather handsome, very agreeable, and Miss Bland loved him with all her heart. Mr. Lexley, I am telling you *everything*. Can you guess who Miss Bland was?"

"Not a sister of Mrs. Dennison?" said he. "Her maiden name, I know, was Bland."

"Not a sister of Mrs. Dennison," she repeated, "but Mrs. Dennison herself. Now you understand why Plumpton Priors is my home whenever I like to come, and why, though my position in her house is only that of a companion, Mrs. Dennison seems kinder and more considerate to me than to any of her own family or friends. I wonder whether I still remind her of papa. I hope not. The first time I ever saw her she said she knew me by something in my manner and the tone of my voice, even before I told her my name. I was very friendless then, very forlorn and helpless. If it had not been for my two hands, I must have starved; but, happily, I could play the pianoforte, and I gave lessons at eighteen-pence an hour. How long the hours used to be! and oh, Mr. Lexley! if you knew how stupid some girls are, and how difficult it is to make them play in time!"

He was looking at her with a fond, pitiful admiration that touched her to the heart.

"I hate to think of it," said he. "You—who ought to be a queen on a throne!"

"I was a very stupid girl myself, once," she continued hurriedly, and in some confusion. "I ran away from school. You ought to know this, Mr. Lexley. Ran away with a gentleman I had only seen in my walks to and from church, and had never even spoken to. He wrote me beautiful letters—I was young and foolish, hating school, and

having no real home; for a cousin of my father's, who took charge of me in the holidays, never let me forget I was a dependant. It seemed a fine thing to have a lover of one's own, and I suppose I cherished some romantic girlish notions then, that have all been knocked out of me since. In short, I slipped through the gate one morning, before anybody was up, with a thick veil on and a travelling-bag in my hand, to find a four-wheeled cab and a gentleman in a white hat waiting at the end of the lane. By twelve o'clock in the day I was legally entitled to call myself Mrs. Delancy, and crying as if my heart would break, for sheer fright at the plunge I had made."

"Did you care for him?" he asked eagerly, with retrospective jealousy, that was equally ludicrous and unreasonable.

"I thought I did then," she answered. "I am sure I did not *now*. There was so much hurry and excitement about the whole thing, that I had no leisure to analyse my feelings, and I accepted this new life with tolerable content. The very fact of being married seems to a mere girl, as I was, so high a step in the social scale. For a week or two I don't think I regretted my folly, and if Mr. Delancy had been tolerably kind to me I believe I should have made him a good wife—perhaps loved him, though they say a woman never loves a man she cannot respect. But I soon found out what I had done, and wished myself back again a hundred times a day. It was bad enough to grind on through one unvarying routine of lessons, music, black-board, and bread-and-butter, in a place that was half-prison, half-convent, but it was worse to find oneself the slave of an adventurer, the accomplice —Mr. Lexley, I must say it—of a sharper!

"Brussels, Paris, Vienna, Trieste, Italy, Greece —we visited them all, we left them all more or less tainted with suspicion, more or less detected and disgraced. You liked my playing the other night, didn't you? If I choose, Mr. Lexley, I can play better than most professionals. Well, our plan was this. We took beautiful rooms, drove good horses, lived like people with a large income, and gave pleasant little dinners or suppers, according to the fashion of the place.

"You can guess what it all meant. Mr. Delancy would sit down to any game at cards, against any adversary, for any stake, but what he liked best was écarté in my drawing-room, while I played the pianoforte and overlooked his adversary's hand. Will you believe it—he invented a scale of music by which I could communicate to him the cards his antagonist held; and forced me to assist him in this basest and most cowardly of robberies, because it was so impossible to bring it home! I wonder how I could. I had rather have cut my right hand off; but he frightened me, and I *did*. Wait, I have not told you all.

"We never stayed long in one place. Mr. Delancy understood his profession thoroughly, and passed for a wealthy Englishman tormented with the continual restlessness foreigners attribute to our nation, who, attracted by her musical talents, had run away with a young girl from a convent, and dared not return home, dreading the vengeance of her relatives. This romance served to render us objects of interest, and accounted for my persistent performances on the pianoforte. In this way we travelled nearly round the world. We gave up Europe, after an unmistakable hint to leave Russia, for Egypt, India, Japan, Australia, South America,

and New York. I played my treacherous sonatas, and my husband swindled his guests at whist, piquet, écarté—every game in which my music made him independent of chance. He had often been suspected, but in the last place he was found out. A Yankee, of whom he won several thousand dollars, accused him face to face, and when I expected no less than a fearful fracas and an immediate duel, coolly proposed to join partnership with him in fraud, and 'floated by the lady's assistance,' as he expressed it, 'squeeze the marrow out of creation!'

"Then I fired up. There was a fearful row. I gave vent to the indignation I had smothered for years. I spoke my mind freely, till at last he struck me—I'm sure I don't wonder—and I left the house, taking with me nothing but the clothes I had on, to earn my own livelihood, and never see his face again.

"I heard of him though, more than once, while I remained teaching music in New York and Boston, till I could scrape enough money together to bring me home. I heard of his trial for something like forgery, and the narrow escape he had through the manifest perjury of witnesses. I heard of him as concerned in all the gigantic swindles that come to full growth only in the States; the last I heard was that he had started as an accredited agent from one of the new republics, to the Spanish Government at the Havannah, in a small steamer that had run many a blockade. The rest is too shocking to tell; but you have listened so far, Mr. Lexley, you must listen to the end.

"The steamer never reached her destination; the agent never arrived to present his papers; but after a long interval of suspense that steamer came ashore one morning with the flood, her rigging standing,

her fittings untouched—(you see I am sailor enough to speak like one)—but her cabins rifled and ransacked; her decks, her bulwarks, her very taffrail stained with blood, and not a living soul on board. She must have been captured by pirates, who had not suffered one of her crew or passengers to escape. The surmise proved too true; and, after a rigid inquiry, was verified by the Spanish authorities, who sent a ship of war at once to hunt out and punish the offenders. Then I ordered my mourning, and went down on my knees to thank God that I had no children, and was free.

"I made my way back to England after a time, and, resuming my maiden name, managed to make a livelihood out of my music, and felt tolerably happy. I increased the number of my pupils, and earned many a guinea playing at morning concerts. I wonder if I have ever played to *you* without knowing it. How odd it would be if I had! So time went on, and I should have liked the life very well but that it was so lonely. The concert people I didn't care about, and a woman who lives by herself in London—no compliments, please—cannot be too particular, so I had no friends. For days together I never opened my lips, except to say 'One, two, three, four,' to my pupils; so I took to reading the advertisements in the daily papers, and wondering if the lady who 'wanted a companion' would like such a companion as me.

"At last I answered a notice that looked promising, made an appointment, called at the house, and was shown upstairs to Mrs. Dennison.

"We rub on together very tolerably. She is kinder to me than to anyone else. Last season, in London, she says she found me a great comfort. I don't know how, nor why she required it, but if

she is satisfied so am I. Then I came here for a few weeks in the autumn. Since that I have been staying in the Regent's Park with an aunt of my mother's, and a fortnight ago I returned for good. Now you know all about me, Mr. Lexley. Never breathe a syllable of my strange history. To you and to everybody here I am Miss Blair, and Miss Blair I must remain. We will both forget what you said just now, and continue, I hope, the very best of friends."

She put her hand out frankly, and he did what was very natural under the circumstances, if not very discreet. Taking it in both his own he pressed it to his lips, and embarked, as she must have foreseen, on a torrent of protestations, the fiercer that they had been so long kept back.

"I love you—I love you!" he repeated; "the more dearly, the more madly, for all you have gone through. Oh, Miss Blair! after such a life as yours it is something to find an honest man, who would ask no greater blessing than to toil for you and serve you like a slave. I would shelter you from every storm, defend you against every enemy. If I cannot give you happiness, Miss Blair—Laura—I can give you *rest*."

It was what she most desired on earth. No practised suitor versed in women's ways could have invented any argument or entreaty so likely to prevail as this simple plea, that sprang from a truthful heart. She looked full in his face, with a sad smile.

"You little know," she answered, "all you are so eager to undertake. I ought to give you a frank and hearty 'Yes.' I *will*, too, but on certain conditions. I have a good deal of pride, Mr. Lexley, with other evil qualities you will find out in

"Taking it in both his own
he pressed it to his lips"

time, and none of your neighbours shall say that the adventuress at Plumpton Priors entrapped our parson into marriage under false pretences. You shall go at once to Mr. Dennison. I believe him to be the kindest and most generous of men. You shall tell him my whole history, and ask his advice. I have perfect confidence in his honour. I will abide by his decision. If he thinks it feasible—why—perhaps we may argue the point again to-morrow in the same place. Here we are, back at the house, and you've never seen the harmonium after all. Good-bye. Will you do as I tell you?"

He drew her towards him; pressed one kiss on her forehead, and vanished, leaving Miss Blair in a state of much doubt and indecision as to whether she had done wisely or well.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LION'S DEN

IF an Englishman's house is his castle, he certainly selects its donjon keep to live in himself. The squire's justice-room, my lord's library, the duke's sanctum, is invariably the gloomiest apartment architectural science can devise; and whether a man's position obliges him to inhabit a shooting-box or a palace, he seems constrained to move his blotting-book, cigars, bootjack, and other comforts into some dismal hole, whence there is small temptation for any supernumerary guest to turn him out. Mr. Dennison was no exception to the rule. He read, wrote, smoked, slumbered, and indeed spent the greater part of his life in an apartment from which the builder's design had excluded light and air with surprising ingenuity. It was a low, ill-constructed room, that seemed to be all corners, with a heavy ceiling and two narrow windows facing a dead wall. Furnished in unpretending style, with a knee-hole table, a worn leather sofa, a gun-rack, whip-stand, and weighing-machine, it was ornamented by a portrait of Daniel Lambert, a stuffed spaniel in a glass case, an Ordnance map of the county, and a half-effaced print representing the meet of a pack of foxhounds in the year 1750. A few shelves intended for books were laden with disused powder-horns, shot-pouches, and fishing-

tackle, all out of repair; while the literary element, consisting of a "Directory," a work on farriery, and an odd volume of a sporting novel, lay on the writing-table. One article, however, most desirable in itself, and of daily use, I have omitted to mention. It was a deep, easy, and sleep-promoting arm-chair. Mr. Dennison, after a cold ride to inspect hospital accounts, or preside at poor-law boards, loved to lose himself in its embraces, and court those unacknowledged snatches of daylight slumber that always seem more enjoyable than the authorised oblivion of night.

From these he was so often disturbed by Aunt Emily, who had no scruple in waking people up to their duty, that he compared himself to Baron Trenck—when, in the persecutions of a Prussian prison, that martyr learned to answer the sentries in his sleep.

The old face seems very worn and weary, though calm and still, in its repose; the thin hair is very white against the black leather covering of the chair; but waking or sleeping, lips and brow wear the placid expression that is stamped by a good heart; and Uncle John, lying dead in his coffin, will look very much as he does now, at rest in his arm-chair.

It disturbs him but little that the door should be flung open, letting in a rush of cold air, answered like clockwork by a puff of smoke down the chimney, and succeeded by the entrance of his wife, who, flouncing noisily into the room, sweeps sundry papers off the writing-table with the swing of her skirts. He is used to such abrupt arrivals and departures, so he raises his sleepy eyes, and murmurs, "Well, my dear, is there anything I can do for you?"

"It is surprising to me," says Aunt Emily in her harshest tones, "how you can snore there like a pig, Mr. Dennison, when you were in bed last night before twelve o'clock, and didn't get up this morning till a quarter to nine. It can't be good for you. It's just the way poor Uncle Edward went off, and I suppose if anybody else told you it was unhealthy, you'd make an effort and discontinue the practice. But I may talk till I'm hoarse."

"Don't do that, dear," he answers; "I'm wide awake now. Is there anything amiss? Anything you want me to put right?"

"Fifty things," is the ungracious reply. "However, that is not the question. I've a piece of news —I daresay you won't believe it—I think Laura has made a conquest. I think Algernon Lexley would propose to her if he had the chance."

"Really!" says he, trying to look more surprised than he feels. Uncle John, though long since impervious to the universal malady, has not forgotten its symptoms, but to admit that he suspected anything of the kind would be to lay himself open to reproach for not imparting so exciting a surmise. He contents himself, therefore, with another "Really!!" yet more suggestive of wonder than the first.

"Mind, I only say I *think* it," continues Mrs. Dennison, looking exceedingly sagacious. "I can see as far as my neighbours, and I am confident he admires her. They are out walking together now, and I shouldn't wonder the least if he proposed before they come home. She will consult me, of course. I don't know quite what to say. It would be a good thing for Laura, if it *can* be a good thing for a woman to be married."

"And a bad thing for Lexley," says Uncle

John; "if it *can* be a bad thing for a man to be married."

"Oh, I know what *you* think," continues his wife irritably. "But I am considering my friend's welfare, here and hereafter. What's his living worth?"

Mr. Dennison pondered. "Perpetual curacy, my dear," he answered, "not a living, more's the pity. It may bring him in three hundred a year at the outside. He has some private fortune, I know; but still he is hardly what you ladies call a good match. Hadn't they better put it off, and see what turns up?"

"You always say that when people are going to be married," replied his wife in high scorn. "You never seem to think it can answer, though I am sure in your own case it has been the saving of you. If it hadn't been for me — managing, scheming, toiling like a slave—you'd have been ruined years ago; and in your grave too, I firmly believe. But it's no use looking for gratitude from a *man*!"

"My dear, I'm sure you've done admirably," answered placable Uncle John; "but as Lexley, who is a well-principled fellow, does not think of proposing to *you*, it seems that we are travelling out of the record—what our friend Foster would call, getting off the line. By the bye, Emily, have you ordered a room for young Maxwell?"

"Of course I have. Didn't you tell me he was coming? It would be a good thing for Laura, no doubt," continued Mrs. Dennison, reverting to the engrossing topic. "She has no friends, no expectations, not a farthing of her own; and her good looks are fading every day. I really believe she couldn't do better. And as for him"—

"As for him," repeated Uncle John, "it's not

quite so clear a case. She's a wonderful musician, no doubt; has a handsome face, a fine figure, and is always beautifully dressed; but do you consider she's the sort of person to make a good clergyman's wife?"

Now Mrs. Dennison was a shrewd woman enough, and this was exactly the point she had been debating in her own mind ever since the idea entered her head that it would be a capital thing for Laura if she could effect a match with the tall young parson. She was not without scruples, and although dissatisfied, as most women are, with the number she had drawn in the matrimonial lottery, entertained, in common with her sex, an exaggerated idea of the happiness enjoyed, through that institution, by those who were more fortunate than herself. She felt, and indeed proclaimed, that it was a great responsibility to bring people together with a view to coupling them for life; always declaring she was the last person in the world to interfere in such matters, and had made it a rule, since she was a girl, to wash her hands, as she expressed it, of the whole concern.

Whatever doubts she entertained as to its wisdom were at once dispelled by her husband's apparent disinclination to her plan. It only required a little opposition to decide Aunt Emily on persevering in any line of conduct she had once commenced, and Uncle John was neither irritated nor surprised when, after a minute's silence, she walked to the grate, stirred the fire with considerable vehemence, and thus delivered her verdict—

"I think it would be for the happiness of both. If my opinion is asked, I shall say so openly. It's my firm belief marriages are made in heaven. You needn't laugh, Mr. Dennison, though I daresay *you*

consider the whole thing is a trial, rather than a blessing!"

"My dear, I never said so!" protested Uncle John, wondering at the sagacity that had thus fathomed his sentiments and the eloquence that could express them in so concise a form of speech.

"Very well, then, that's settled," continued Mrs. Dennison. "Now, about the upper housemaid. I've paid her wages to the eighth — that's her month, you know — with her fare, third class, back to London. And do you choose to have the furniture cleaned in the pink dressing-room? It's like a pigsty at this moment."

"My dear, *you* manage these things," replied her husband, who was getting sleepy again. "I don't think I ever saw the upper housemaid—thank goodness none of them come in here—and I haven't set foot in the pink dressing-room for thirty years; whatever you settle I am sure to think right."

"Yes, but you ought to know," she replied; "I can't imagine how you spend your time down here. You never look into the tradesmen's bills, nor the house accounts, nor anything but that plan for enlarging Middleton Hospital and those rubbishing letters from your agent. Well, I suppose, as the song says, 'Women must work.'"

"And men must sleep," he added good-humouredly, though the accusation of idleness was somewhat hard on Uncle John, than whom nobody could toil more indefatigably at county business, nor take more trouble to promote the welfare of his labourers, tenantry, and neighbours.

"Hush!" exclaimed Aunt Emily, setting down the poker with a vigour that brought tongs and fire-shovel clanging into the fender. "That's Mr. Lexley's foot in the passage. I've a deal more

to say. It will do another time. Mind, I think it an excellent plan," and out she sailed with a gracious smile, somewhat thrown away on the visitor, whose preoccupation was very apparent as he came in.

"I walked over again to-day," he began, "to see you about that road-rate; something has happened since to put it all out of my head. Mr. Dennison, I want to speak to you on a very serious matter—of course in the strictest confidence."

"My dear fellow," replied Uncle John, "nothing *can* be a very serious matter when a man is under thirty. But let us do one thing at a time. You will find the estimate for your road-rate on that writing-table, unless Mrs. Dennison has swept it into the fire with her dress. Put it in your pocket, and take it home. I copied it out on purpose. Now, is this a long story you have to tell?"

Mr. Dennison had the knack of putting people at their ease. He entered into their feelings from sheer kindness of disposition, and was a living instance of Count d'Orsay's famous maxim that "A good heart is good manners ready made."

"There is much to explain," said Lexley, brightening. "But I will make it as short as I can."

"All right," answered his host, proceeding to light a cigar with great deliberation. "I always listen best when I smoke. Now, fire away!"

Then Lexley, with less circumlocution than might have been expected from the style of his sermons, informed his host how, since he had met a certain lady at the Priors, he had formed for himself an ideal of domestic happiness that never entered his head before; how he had considered the subject in all its bearings as a man and a clergyman; how he had come to the decision that

Miss Blair was the only woman on earth who could make him happy; and how, not half an hour ago, he had taken the fatal plunge and asked her to be his wife. "It was an anxious moment," he concluded, "and I own I trembled for her answer."

"I never did it but once," said Uncle John, "and if I remember right, I was in a horrible funk too."

"She is an angel," exclaimed the clergyman. "She—she accepted me under certain conditions. But first she told me the sad history of her life. She's a widow, Mr. Dennison. She has been married before."

"That's rather an advantage," observed the other, between the whiffs of his cigar. "She won't expect you to be much better than the rest of mankind, and will be less disappointed than a girl."

"She has gone through a deal of trouble," continued the lover, "and I only pray that I may be able to make up to her for the hardships of her past life. Do you know what her husband was?"

"I know a great many things," answered his host, "that I say nothing about. Her husband was a good-looking scamp named Delancy, who began life as a clerk in an insurance office, turned billiard-marker, blackleg, sharper all round, and so set up for a gentleman. In this last capacity he robbed Percy Mortimer of seven hundred pounds at a sitting at Rio Janeiro. Percy took a great fancy to him, and says he is the cleverest scoundrel he ever knew. What has become of him?"

Lexley looked up alarmed.

"Isn't he dead? He was murdered by pirates somewhere in the West Indies."

"Then I am sorry piracy is a capital offence. Go on."

"Since his death she has been supporting herself by giving music-lessons at eighteen-pence an hour. I cannot bear to think of it. Then Mrs. Dennison"—here Lexley, remembering *why* Mrs. Dennison took a fancy to her, blundered somewhat in his narrative—"Mrs. Dennison, who is kindness itself, gave her a home, and her lot has been comparatively a bright one since. After such a past, Mr. Dennison, do you think she would find it very hard to settle down as a country parson's wife?"

"Before I answer, let me ask you one question. Are you in love with this woman? I mean *really* in love as people are in a book?"

"I would lay down my life for her this moment. I worship the very ground she walks on."

"And you have known her just a fortnight. Truly, my dear Lexley, as old Chaucer says, 'the wisest clerks are not the wisest men.'"

"I admit that it sounds hasty, boyish, romantic, idiotic, if you like," continued the clergyman; "but I am not the first man, nor shall I be the last, who has shut his eyes tight, put his hand in the lucky bag and drawn out a prize. It is at Miss Blair's own desire that I have come to consult you. She will not marry me without your consent, your approval, and will abide by your decision as to the wisdom of the step for my sake, not her own."

Fast and thick came the puffs of Uncle John's cigar, till they hung in clouds about his venerable head. After some minutes' pause he waved them away with his hand, and then the oracle spoke out—

"Were you asking me for advice as to marriage in the abstract, I should say, 'My good fellow, wait and see what turns up. Early marriages are apt to end in disappointment that sometimes degenerates into disgust. Later in life people expect

very little, and have learned to content themselves with less.' But if you really *have* set your heart so entirely on this particular lady, who, I grant you, is very handsome and fascinating, why I suppose you must go through the mill—I don't think anything else will cure you, and I congratulate you with all my heart. There is but one bit of advice I can give. Don't start with too exalted an idea of your goddess. She *must* come down from her pedestal sometimes. You wouldn't be so fond of her if she wasn't *a woman*, and being a woman you shouldn't think the worse of her that she has women's ways and women's weaknesses. When she does not agree with you, don't be provoked with her because she is your wife, but listen to her courteously, though she is talking nonsense, as you would to any other lady. If you can manage her at all, it will be through her affections, not through her sagacity nor her self-interest; and, above all, never attempt to reason with her as you would with a man!"

"You are a kind friend, Mr. Dennison," said the other, "and I thank you from my heart. I will follow your advice to the letter."

"I am sure you will," answered Uncle John, "as it tallies with your own inclinations. Now you had better go and ask the ladies to give you a cup of tea; they can't know you are an engaged man yet, and will be glad to see you in the drawing-room."

So Lexley, hoping for one more glimpse of his idol, traversed a dark passage and a red-baize door into the hall, where he paused, felt his whiskers, and shook himself together a little before entering the blue drawing-room.

Since his accident, this apartment had been entirely given over to Percy Mortimer. Yet, moved

by his piteous entreaties, it had come to be an established custom for the ladies to assemble there at tea-time. Though the hum of laughter and conversation came from within, Lexley felt when he opened the door that to *him* the blue drawing-room was a blank.

Annie Dennison sat near Mr. Mortimer's sofa filling the cups and talking volubly. Her aunt, knitting in an arm-chair, seemed in high good-humour. The invalid, lying back on his sofa, looked, as usual, sleek, imperturbable, satisfied with the world in general and with Percy Mortimer in particular. To Lexley he had never before seemed so interesting, for did not somebody's husband win seven hundred of him (however unfairly) at Rio Janeiro?

With one despairing glance round the room he satisfied himself of *her* absence. He satisfied himself of something else too! Though he could not have explained why, he felt sure that he had been watched—suspected—found out.

There was a cordiality like that of a mother-in-law in Aunt Emily's welcome. Annie shot at him admiring glances of mingled mirth and approval, while Percy Mortimer's manner denoted a degree of interest, and even commiseration, as touching as it was unusual; were further evidence required it was furnished by Aunt Emily's reproving frown when Annie offered the young clergyman tea, with this pert observation—

"You must want it sadly after your walk. Laura is so tired she has sent for hers upstairs."

Poor Lexley's confusion was painfully apparent, and Percy Mortimer came to the rescue. As a rule, a man dislikes seeing another man subjected to slow torture.

"Shall you foot it all the way back?" said he heartily. "How a fellow envies you who has but one leg to stand on. If you'll make the match I'll back you to do a thousand miles in a thousand hours."

How this sporting proposal would have been answered, and whether in his agitation the clergyman might not have rushed wildly into this or any other wager of a like nature, can never now be known, for even while Mortimer spoke the tingling of the door-bell vibrated through the house, dogs barked, voices were heard in the hall, and an arrival, accompanied by a draught of cold air from without, was ushered into the drawing-room.

"Why, it's Mr. Maxwell!" said Aunt Emily. The observant ear would have detected in her tone a certain austere gratification, as of one whose prophecies, wasted on unbelieving ears, had been triumphantly fulfilled.

"Why, it's Mr. Maxwell!" echoed Annie, and in her voice lurked a subdued and tender welcome, not without something of reproach that seemed to murmur, "Too late; you ought to have been here yesterday or the day before."

"Why, it's Maxwell!" repeated Mortimer, from the sofa; and had the usages of society admitted of his speaking his sentiments aloud, he would have added, "I'm always pleased to see you, old fellow; but I should have been better pleased if you had stayed away. Why the deuce have you come back now?"

Why the deuce had he? It was the question he asked himself all the way down in the train, all the way from the station in his fly, though he knew the answer quite well, and read it besides in Annie's dark eyes the moment he entered the drawing-room.

They had haunted him a good deal in London during the last ten days, floating about over *précis* and protocols in his office, getting between his vision and the queen of trumps at the Turf Club, gazing at him through the ranks of dancers and over the heads of chaperons on staircases and in ball-rooms, crowded even now on the wintry side of Easter; once, seen as in a dream dimmed with such sad and sweet reproach that he rose prematurely to go home from a noisy supper-party to which he had better never have sat down. He *must* take one more look at them, he told himself, if only to be satisfied they were less dangerous in reality than imagination. He had been invited to come back to the Priors and have another ride on Barmecide. It would seem rude not to go, and unkind besides towards Percy, about whom he was *exceedingly anxious*, so he asked his chief for a couple of days' leave, took his railway ticket, telegraphed for a fly, and here he was! Shaking hands with Miss Dennison, he felt the dark eyes were deadlier than ever at close quarters, and that perhaps he had better have stayed away.

She seemed to have lost her tongue. Aunt Emily was buried in thought, musing indeed on the probability that her new housemaid had forgotten to light a fire in Mr. Maxwell's room; Horace himself, usually so glib and debonair, could think of nothing to say, and was really grateful to Mortimer for an opportunity of answering the established question—

"Have you brought an evening paper? Is there any news in London?"

None whatever, of course. Then out came the usual budget. Ministers had a squeak for it last night on the Tramways and Traffic Bill; Lord St. Lukes, commonly called "the Silent Friend," had

made a capital speech; Miss Myrtle's marriage was off (this from the best authority); the foreign horse was safe to win the Two Thousand; the Duke's interest had failed to carry the Buttermouth election, and the Duchess was furious; a Frenchman was advertised to start for America in a balloon; and the Quorn had had a good run from John o' Gaunt. He had told them everything, and *there* was the *Globe.*

Mortimer made a dash at the paper, and Horace, drawing near Miss Dennison, asked after his friend Lexley, as an excuse for something to say.

"Mr. Lexley!" repeated Annie, looking round. "Why, he was in the room a minute ago. I do think you have told us very little news, Mr. Maxwell, considering you were so long away. We're quiet people enough in the country, but we don't altogether go to sleep even here. I shouldn't wonder if we too had something interesting to communicate before this time to-morrow."

"Annie, Annie!" exclaimed Aunt Emily, in tones of stern reproof; but Annie, nothing daunted, prattled on—

"Don't you miss anybody, Mr. Maxwell? Has a week of London made you so worldly that you cannot remember each individual composing our humble family circle? Probably some new fellow-traveller has put her out of your head, but you have never asked after Miss Blair."

"I wasn't thinking of Miss Blair," said he. "I hope she's quite well."

"She *was* to-day at luncheon-time," replied Annie. "How she will feel to-morrow at breakfast when she has been made acquainted with your neglect, I will not take upon me to say, unless, indeed, she has found other consolations, other"—

"Annie, it's time to dress," interrupted her aunt, rising in majestic displeasure. "Mr. Maxwell, be good enough to ring the bell. I've put you in your old room, and we dine at a quarter before eight."

As the door closed on the ladies, Horace drew to his friend's sofa. "How's the leg, old fellow?" said he. "And what's all this about our handsome friend, Miss Blair?"

Mortimer twisted amongst his cushions while he replied—

"I can't help thinking there's something up between her and the parson; they've been for a long walk together this afternoon, and Lexley bolted directly you came in."

CHAPTER IX

SOUVENT FEMME VARIE

AVAILING himself of his familiarity with its passages and back settlements, Lexley had indeed effected his escape from the Priors at the moment of his friend's arrival, seen only by a scullery-maid. As he glided past the glowing regions of the kitchen into the outer air, that imaginative damsel, always on the watch for ghosts, relieved her nerves by a little scream when his tall figure disappeared into the night, but he had otherwise no reason to be dissatisfied with the skill and secrecy of his retreat. Passing in front of the house, he paused to look steadfastly on one of the many windows of the upper storey through which lights could be seen burning, then with a blessing on his lips and a strange wild rapture in his heart, dashed across the park on his homeward journey.

In that room, he told himself, as his long bounding strides took him farther and farther from the shrine of his divinity, dwelt the paragon to whom henceforth his whole life should be devoted.

Through that room he pictured her moving to and fro in the majesty of a beauty that all the jewels of the East would be powerless to enhance, thinking surely of *him*! However bitter may have been our experience, by whatever training our passions have been subdued, the heart will judge another's feelings

by its own. She had almost promised, nay, subject to Uncle John's approval, she had *quite* promised, to be his wife; she *must* be meditating now on that future to which she was pledged, and recalling more than kindly the words of him who would give his life for one loving look, one bright, confiding smile.

"Perhaps she sees me now," thought Lexley, walking over five miles an hour in his excitement, "as clearly as I see her. Perhaps at this very moment she is telling herself that it is worth something to be offered such blind and trusting devotion as mine. 'You do love me, I think,' she said, in those clear sweet tones that are like music from heaven. I do, I do! My darling, how I wish I could be with you this very moment. I believe I should never have the heart to leave you again!"

Was she thinking of him? We can go into Miss Blair's room if we like, and see what she is about.

She has dressed for dinner more carefully than ever, and cannot but admit that the result of her toilet is very satisfactory and effective. With most women such a consciousness would afford at least an agreeable sensation, but Miss Blair looks in the glass and mutters audibly, "You fool! how you *have* thrown yourself away!" Then she moves the candles to a writing-table, sits carefully down so as not to crease her dress, and unlocks a brass-bound desk that seems to have seen no little service.

Out they come, tumbling on the blotting-book, a dozen photographs at least, and she scans them, one after another, with a bitter smile, as if in scorn of her admirers no less than of herself. To three she accords a grave and sad attention. The first is a young, handsome man in the uniform of the Austrian cavalry. "Poor Ernest!" she murmurs, "I do

believe you cared for me. That was a foolish duel, too. And how could you expect it would lead to anything but my deciding never to see you again? It was only humanity on my part, for I could not have loved you, with that dear silly face; but you were a kind-hearted, affectionate boy, and I am sorry I made you so unhappy. Yes, I shall keep yours."

Then she draws a second from its envelope with real concern. This is a stout, uninteresting personage, wearing a furred coat, with a foreign order as broad as an insurance plate on his breast. There is something coarse and sensual about his lips and nostrils, his eyes are heavy, and his mouth is large; but the man looks well-to-do and prosperous, even in a photograph.

"Ah!" she says, shaking her head mournfully. "There was the great mistake of my life. But I couldn't—I *couldn't*—I don't think I could, even now. And yet what a position! What wealth! What diamonds! What carriages and horses! What luxury? The place in Moldavia was fit for an empress. Then, obstinate, pig-headed as you were, I could lead you with a thread. Everybody urged me to it—even Delancy, the heartless villain! And a divorce is so easy to get in that country. I shall never forget the day you asked me, nor the Grand Duchess's face when she sent for you from the *Engländerinn's* side—the *Engländerinn*, indeed! How angry she was, and you too, when you came back and found the Grand Duke himself had taken your place. You lost your temper then, and made your strange and startling proposal. How clumsily and ungraciously you did it! But I ought to have accepted. I should have been a great lady now; very rich, and very—no, not happy; very much disgusted, I expect. Still, I should have advised

anyone else to do it in my place. I wonder whether I was a good woman to say 'No,' or only a great fool? I scarcely knew which, even when I saw you driving that hideous little princess about Bucharest; but she led you the life of a dog, and ran away with a Belgian. That's one comfort. Well, in my whole experience of mankind, you were most unlike the rest of the world; and if all my other photographs must be swept into the fire, were it only as a matter of curiosity, I should keep *you*."

So the likeness goes back into its cover, and she draws out another, of which the lineaments seem blurred and indistinct, for all the scorn has faded from her face, and she sees it through a mist of tears.

"Oh, my darling—my darling!" she whispers, "if I had but met you sooner, how different life would have been! What a dream it is now, that island in the Greek sea, and the bench beneath the cedars, and those long Italian lessons, with your dark eyes looking into mine. Was ever language so sweet, or spoken by so sweet a voice? All women loved you, and no wonder; but none, I think, so well as I did. And I never told you—never. But you were sure of it, my own! Sure as I was that you cared for me. Shall I ever forget your look when my husband, shuffling his cards, with that hateful laugh, said, 'Laura, you have a good head, but no heart.' You knew me better, and trusted me, even as I trusted you. And now, to think of that brave, beautiful face sleeping forty fathoms deep in the blue Mediterranean! and I shall never, never see it again! Oh, Victor! I wish I was with you there—at rest for ever, by your side."

Here Miss Blair, breaking down entirely, buries

her face in her shapely hands, and cries quietly for a few seconds, till she remembers that her eyes will be red, and that Mr. Maxwell will probably sit opposite to her at dinner.

She knows, or rather guesses, that he has arrived, having already referred more than once to *Bradshaw's Railway Guide* in the library; and calculating the hour at which the train is due, with the distance by road from the station, is satisfied that the bustle she has overheard in the hall can only have been created by the expected traveller from London.

So she bathes her eyes in cold water till all trace of tears has been removed, and setting aside the three reserved photographs, locks them carefully away in her desk. Then, sweeping the others together in a heap, puts them all on the fire, to be held down with the poker till they are consumed. It seems to her that by this holocaust she has done full justice to the man who so lately asked her to be his wife; and having thus liberated herself, as it were, from quarantine, that she is entitled to start on a fresh cruise with a clean bill of health and a roving commission once more.

"But I must make up my mind to-night," she thinks, while finally arming herself with fans, gloves, and pocket-handkerchief. "What a fool I am not to have made it up this afternoon. Has he not offered me the very thing I want? A home, where I can be safe and at rest. How often I have longed for just such a lot as this! A life of peace and quiet and security, with a good man that one wasn't too fond of, to provide for and take care of one. There is no fear of my being too fond of Mr. Lexley, and yet I like him well enough in a cold, rational way. After all, he is by no means ugly when he gets

excited; and there is something very manly in his voice and bearing, when called upon to exert himself, that makes me feel I could trust him, and perhaps after a time get as fond of him as my nature will allow. We should live down here, I suppose, in a pretty little house with roses at the windows, and I would drive a basket-carriage about amongst his poor people, order his dinner, mend his gloves, look after his comforts, and make my husband thoroughly happy. My *husband*! How odd to associate that word with anything but a shudder of fear, contempt, and disgust! He certainly cares for me horribly! Quite as much as any of the others did. And I—oh! I must have something to love. I am so lonely; and when my pride breaks down, I feel as if I should like to die. He would be very good to me, I think, very gentle and forbearing. I should tell him everything—everything—my whole history from beginning to end. I am glad I was so honest to-day; it will make it all the easier. And he will put his strong arm round me and call me 'Laura,' as Victor did. Oh! why has this man come back from London to spoil it all? and why has he got that haunting, pleading look of Victor in his eyes?"

Who would have thought the beautiful woman who swept into the drawing-room five minutes afterwards, cold as marble and stately as a queen, could have hidden all these passions, feelings, and memories beneath that calm, courteous manner—that gracious, dignified bearing? And was it not as well that Lexley, half-way home by this time, had been debarred by the laws of material nature from assisting at a toilet that could call forth so many painful and conflicting emotions?

It was worthy of remark, that even Aunt Emily,

whose want of tact was proverbial, did not congratulate Miss Blair on the result of her afternoon's expedition, though satisfied that her own anticipations had certainly been realised. Nor did Annie Dennison venture on any more direct impertinence than a hope "Miss Blair's walk had not tired her too much to play to-night, even for so small an audience." But Uncle John, who took her in to dinner, gave her arm just such a gentle pressure as assured her of his secrecy and support, whatever course she might think proper to pursue.

"How kind you always are!" she whispered; and, strange to say, could not trust her voice to add another syllable.

It was but a small party, very different from that which had gathered round the same table the night before the memorable run from Plumpton Osiers. Horace Maxwell sat by the side of Annie, and opposite Miss Blair. The former was silent and preoccupied. Horace thought, like a fool, she had left her heart on the invalid's sofa in the next room. Miss Blair never talked much, but she asked him a few questions across the table, for the pleasure of meeting his glance when he replied. The dark eyes reminded her more than ever of poor Victor; and the difficulty of making up her mind for to-morrow only increased as the evening wore on.

Matters were still worse when coffee was brought into the drawing-room. Aunt Emily, who wrote her letters at all sorts of inconvenient hours, was scribbling assiduously in her own corner. Annie, with the awkwardness of inexperience, had got wedged into a chair behind Mortimer's sofa, from which she dared not extricate herself under Maxwell's eye, lest he should think she wanted to be near him —an idea that would have made him supremely

happy, as perhaps she suspected; and yet wishing heartily to do this very thing, she would rather have put her hand in the fire than have done it. Uncle John had wrapped himself in the folds of a county paper. Miss Blair and Maxwell were fairly thrown on their own resources for companionship and amusement.

He proposed a game at billiards in the next room, chiefly, I am bound to say, out of pique, and watching Miss Dennison the while. Annie neither lifted her eyes nor turned her head; and Horace stalked off to the billiard-table, smothering in a careless laugh certain twinges of jealousy caused by the young lady's untiring devotion to her patient. No sooner were the billiard-players out of hearing, however, than she relieved her mind by an audible "Well, I *do* think!" which caused Uncle John to look up from his newspaper, and Percy Mortimer to laugh.

Miss Blair was not very expert with a cue. Restless Horace soon wished himself back again, but he had brought her here, and was bound to play out the game.

She strung to begin—won, and put her ball in balk.

"Is not Mr. Lexley a great friend of yours?" she asked, while Horace, with brilliant execution, attempted an impossible stroke—and failed.

"Very," he replied carelessly. "Best fellow in the world, Lexley. We were boys together. Why isn't he here?"

"Don't you know? Now tell me the truth, Mr. Maxwell. Don't you really know?—(Can I make a cannon off the red?)—I am glad he is a friend of yours. I've a great mind to tell you something."

"Do," said Horace, who thought he heard a

move in the next room, and fixed his attention with difficulty on the matter in hand. "I'm dying to know everything."

"I like him to have nice friends. That is the reason. Now can't you guess?"

He looked up, suddenly enlightened. "Do you mean that he's going to be married, Miss Blair? Dear old fellow! I wish him joy with all my heart."

He, not *you*. Then it was the friend who at once excited his interest, not the woman thus removed for ever out of reach. The frank and hearty tone declared his sentiment too clearly. She could have struck him with her cue.

"And won't you wish *me* joy, Mr. Maxwell?" she asked, making an egregious miss that left a powdering of chalk on the cloth. "Am I to count for nothing in an arrangement which, at least, could not well take place without my consent?"

"Certainly not," replied Horace, with the readiness of a man of the world towards a woman whom he does *not* love. "I congratulate my friend because he has drawn a prize. I do not congratulate you, because you could marry anybody you choose. Only I think you have made a good choice."

She swept him a scornful curtsey, passing round the table for her next stroke, and though she looked very proud and handsome whilst she played it, Horace could not repress a little shudder of commiseration, and a hope that his friend Lexley had not got a handful.

"It's quite true," she resumed.—"How badly I'm playing to-night!—Everybody will know all about it to-morrow, so I tell *you* of it in confidence now. Mr. Lexley this afternoon did me the great honour of asking me to be his wife."

He was sprawling over the table for a losing hazard, and she watched him narrowly while she spoke. Not a quiver of lip or eyelid betrayed the slightest emotion, nor did his cue deviate one hair's-breadth from its aim.

"That's five," said he, taking the balls out of their respective pockets and playing again, before he reverted to the previous question. "He's a plucky fellow, Lexley; and nobody could wish him more success than I do."

"Did it require such courage, then?" she asked, with one of her smiles. "Should you—I mean should any man, hesitate on the brink, when a bold plunge lets him know at once whether he is to sink or swim? If people won't ask, how are other people to guess what they want? I have told you Mr. Lexley did ask. I haven't told you whether *other people* accepted him."

This was the crucial test—now or never. Surely if he cared for her the cue would be dropped, and the player, metaphorically if not literally, at her feet. She watched him narrowly, and thinking it all over afterwards, could not but admit there was something of relief mingled with her disappointment when, feeling quietly under the table for chalk, he observed, with as little discomposure as if she had been his grandmother—

"But you *will*, Miss Blair. He's a dear, good fellow. He'd make a capital husband, and it knocks a man out of time altogether to be thrown over in a thing of this kind."

"You speak feelingly, Mr. Maxwell," she answered, with admirable self-possession. "Has it ever happened to yourself?"

"Often," he said; "and I don't like it at all. It seems to be my fate to originate 'rejected

'He was sprawling over the table.'

addresses.' I have made up my mind never to try again till I am quite sure."

But though he laughed his heart was aching, because of the dark eyes in the next room, belonging to the only woman he had ever seen whom he wished in real earnest to make his wife.

She played her last card now, quietly and deliberately, like a true gambler.

"And if you *were* quite sure," she said, bending over the table to hide a blush, "would that encourage you to begin, or would the lady have to tell it you herself in so many words?"

Even now he could not, or would not, understand. Her whole future as the clergyman's wife seemed to shape itself definitely, while he struck the butt-end of his cue on the floor, and exclaimed, in that frank tone of friendship no woman ever mistakes for love—

"Miss Blair, you're a witch! You have found me out, I do believe. Listen, now. Confidence for confidence. Do you remember that day at dinner, when you were kind enough to show such perfect faith in my honour and discretion?"

"I trusted you implicitly then, just as I trust you now," she answered, and at that moment the door opened to admit the graceful head of Miss Dennison, who had been despatched by her aunt to know if she should send the billiard-players some tea.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Annie, stung by the last sentence, which she overheard, and on which she put her own construction, while she affected to withdraw, as if unwilling to break in on a lover's *tête-à-tête*. "It was only to tell you tea is ready. Never mind; I daresay you are amusing yourselves very pleasantly here."

"Don't go, Miss Dennison," gasped Horace, wishing his handsome antagonist at the bottom of the sea.

But Annie was hurt and implacable. "I hate being in the way," said she with a little forced laugh and a quiver of her lip. "I don't care much for billiards myself. Please go on and don't mind me."

But Miss Blair was already in the drawing-room. "I shall not play any more," said she, passing haughtily through the doorway. "Mr. Maxwell has beaten me a love-game!"

CHAPTER X

FOL QUI S'Y FIE

MAXWELL had better have stayed away. He felt this in spite of his host's hospitable welcome, reiterated when they found themselves together in the smoking-room, where Uncle John loved to betake himself if the ladies did not go to bed too late. In spite of Aunt Emily's gracious reception, of his friend's improving health, of Miss Blair's unconcealed partiality, nay, of Annie Dennison's dark, soft, shining eyes—even the temptation of another mount on Barmecide failed to satisfy him that he had been wise in coming down so readily from London.

"I wish there was any hunting for you to-morrow," said his host, while they arranged themselves comfortably over a blazing fire. "But it's not Foster's day, and the Duke is too far off—three-and-twenty miles at least, and a bad place when you get there. However, you'll be in the Middleton country the day after. I hope you may have as good a run as last time, and that Barmecide won't put you down again. To-morrow is my day for Petty Sessions too, so you must make it out with the

ladies as well as you can. You fellows at the Foreign Office are great in that line, I know."

"What is your honest opinion, Mr. Dennison?" asked Horace, stretching himself luxuriously in the warmth. "Don't you think, altogether, women are rather a mistake?"

"How should we get on without them?" said Uncle John, smoking meditatively. "They certainly do prevent our sitting too long after dinner, and in married life no doubt they make one get up in the morning. No, I shouldn't say they were a mistake, though on certain points they would bear modification."

"All the jolliest fellows I know are bachelors," affirmed Horace, who at that moment desired but one thing on earth—the privilege of surrendering his liberty to the woman he was angry with, because he loved her.

"I doubt it," said Uncle John. "I have often considered the subject, and always arrived at the opposite conclusion. A bachelor does what he likes, and though it sounds a paradox, no man who does what he likes is really happy."

"And yet if you reflect upon it," argued Horace, "two-thirds of the sorrows and half the discomforts of life originate with women. You see a young fellow going to the bad, taking to play, or brandy-and-water; ten to one there is a woman in the case. He has been thrown over, and revenges himself *on* himself; or he has failed to awaken an interest, and thinks, with some justice, that the bigger fool he makes of himself the better she will like him. You observe a jolly, cheerful old gentleman grown suddenly crusty, contradictory, and cantankerous. If you take the trouble to inquire, you will probably find that his wife is going to make him do something

he cordially hates, with a sublime disregard for her husband's comfort, as compared with her duties to society and position before the world. I declare I think if there were no women, we should be supremely happy, as there is no doubt we should be exceedingly good."

"We should be exceedingly selfish," replied his host; "a failing there is no fear a man will acquire whose lot is cast with the opposite sex. They take care of that. In all the trifles of life they consult their own wishes and convenience, irrespective of time, weather, argument, objection, natural obstacles, and physical impossibilities; but I am bound to say that when you put them on their mettle and demand of them a great sacrifice, they are far more ready to offer it than you can be to accept."

"Only one's life is not made up of great sacrifices," argued Maxwell. "And every-day comfort has much more to do with happiness than occasional self-denial. Nothing can repay a fellow for having to put on a pair of tight boots every time he gets out of bed."

Uncle John, who knew where his own shoe pinched, could not but admit the force of this illustration. He stuck to his position, nevertheless.

"A world without women," he replied, "or perhaps I should say a state of society from which the female element was practically excluded, would be wanting in the very essence of government, the principle of self-restraint."

"'The greatest good for the greatest number,' is a moral law that such a society could never be made to understand; the religion of Mahomet has attempted to establish something of the kind, but that is no argument one way or the other, for, in common with

his Oriental brethren of all creeds, the Mussulman has completely failed to bring his womankind into subjection, and a Turkish gentleman of wealth and position is as fine a specimen of the henpecked husband as you will find in any country on earth. I remember, in my coaching days, we tried to persuade ourselves it was easier to drive four horses than one. The Turk has adapted this fallacy to his domestic life, and found, I believe, no sort of difference in the result. If one of his wives only puts her slippers outside the door, he no more dare go into the room than I dare tell Mrs. Dennison she ought not to wear the same dresses now she did thirty years ago. No; in the saddle the Turk is above admiration, in the harem—which answers to his wife's boudoir—below contempt."

"He has always the Bosphorus to fall back upon," said Horace, lighting a fresh cigar.

"That's where they beat us!" exclaimed Uncle John. "Every man has a remedy in his own hands, quite as efficacious as the sack and the sea; but who has the heart to apply it? To the husband who could punish, judicially, coldly, and without remorse, they will never give offence. But happily such are rare exceptions among mankind. From good-nature, indolence, and a dread of being talked about, husbands are wonderfully placable, even under strong provocation, and women show the ingenuity of their sex in nothing more than the skill with which they prove the elasticity of a masculine temper, by trying it to the very utmost limit that can be borne without giving way. Of all dangerous amusements, I know none so completely to their taste as skating on thin ice."

"And when it lets them in, with a souse," said Horace, "not one of their own sex will wet a finger

to pull them out. It makes one shy of putting oneself in a woman's power, to see how she treats another woman of whom she has the upper hand. You may be sure, if she gets her down she will keep her down."

"There I take leave to differ," observed his host. "Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else, can be sure of what she will or will not do. We have no *data* from which to argue. I grant that, as a general rule, they seem very hard on each other; but take any general rule of their conduct as your guide for a particular instance, and see where it will lead you."

"Then you come back to where I started," said Horace. "Women *are* a mistake, and a wise man will keep clear of the whole difficulty by remaining a bachelor."

"I know a good many bachelors who are anything but clear of the whole difficulty," answered the other. "Indeed, I am not sure but that bachelors are more apt to be under the yoke than married men, on the principle, I suppose, that a volunteer is often keener than a regular soldier. No; there is an old adage which affirms a self-evident truth, that 'when two people ride on a horse, one must ride behind.' In that sentence is condensed the whole science of domestic government."

"And suppose she *won't* ride behind," said Horace, opening a bottle of soda-water.

"You can't change places at a gallop," answered Uncle John. "Jump on first, and keep the horse going so fast that she has enough to do by winding her arms round your waist not to fall off into the mire. What I mean, in plain English, is this: take the initiative on every question of importance, as a

matter of course. Leave to a wife so much of its details that she has no leisure to dispute your plan. It is hopeless to make her understand a theory, but in practice she is more than your equal. Occupation is the one panacea for nervous temperaments—witness, the feminine tendency to needlework. An idle woman is invariably a discontented one, and a wife's discontent, from whatever cause it springs, she attributes to her husband's fault. There are very few ladies who would be ill, and fewer still who would be cross, if they got up at six every morning to black the grates!"

"I should hate them with dirty hands, too," laughed Horace, thinking, it must be confessed, of Annie Dennison's taper fingers and rosy little palms. "After all, I am not sure that it isn't a woman's first duty to be good-looking, even if she is good-for-nothing."

"You don't think so," replied his host. "Men say these things, but each has a pattern treasured up in his own heart that is good, good-looking, devoted to himself, and altogether an impossible piece of perfection. He seeks it all his life, and in every out-of-the-way corner. He will marry over and over again without finding it, yet never despair of its existence. What do you suppose is the moral of Blue Beard?"

"I never knew he had a moral," answered Horace. "I have always considered him a man of extraordinary enterprise, classing him with the people who discover new continents, and want to know where the Nile comes from. If it's not an *immoral* moral, I don't mind hearing it."

"The moral of Blue Beard, I take it, is this," observed Uncle John with perfect gravity, "that one wife is just as tiresome as another wife; that

you may change over and over again without the faintest improvement, and that a wise man will stick to his first venture as the Prayer Book enjoins, 'for better or worse.'"

"Then you *are* an advocate for matrimony after all!" exclaimed Horace, throwing his cigar into the grate.

"Under considerable restrictions, yes," replied his host. "If it is taken in hand, like any other matter of business, with common caution, I do not myself see why in the average of cases it should not turn out fairly well. But if a man is to shut both eyes tight, and then dash headlong into one of the most delicate and difficult negotiations of life, I cannot understand upon what principle he expects everything to turn out in his favour, nor what right he has to blame anything but his own folly when he finds himself in a mess from which there is no extrication. If you buy a farm, you have it surveyed by a responsible land agent—a yacht, you take care that it shall be examined by somebody who understands yachts—a horse, he must be passed by a veterinary surgeon before he goes into your stable. You don't engage a cook without satisfactory references, and you grudge no trouble to become acquainted with the antecedents, temper, and disposition of a governess for your children. But when it is a question of a wife for yourself, you take no pains, you make no inquiries; you get a ticket, at the merest haphazard, for a lottery in which there are confessedly a superfluity of blanks, and think yourself entitled to complain for the rest of your life that you haven't drawn a prize."

"Women run the same risk," said Horace. "That's a comfort, at anyrate. It's as fair for one as the other."

"I'm not clear that they *do* run the same risk," replied Uncle John. "They are far keener-sighted than ourselves. They tell each other many secrets about men that we should be surprised to find them acquainted with, and each knows exactly how far to trust her informant. In the London world I am disposed to believe the chaperons have an organised system of police, with a secret-intelligence department attached; but you ought to know more of these things than I do. That is not the question at present. You asked me if I considered women a mistake, I answer, No. A necessary evil, perhaps, like one's liver and one's conscience. But a mistake —certainly not."

"I am glad to hear it," answered Horace, laughing, "and I value your opinion very much, Mr. Dennison, for I am sure you have had a great deal of experience."

In Uncle John's grim smile there lurked a sad affirmative. Rising from his easy-chair he placed himself with his back to the fire, as if about to commence an oration, but seemed to think better of it, and lit his candle instead.

"Experience does *not* make fools wise," said he. "Most proverbs are fallacious. None greater than that which says it does. Good-night, Maxwell. I hope your room is comfortable. Breakfast as usual —a liberal half-past nine."

The guest was familiar enough with the ways of the house to know that a "liberal half-past nine" meant a punctual ten o'clock, and determined that for once in his life he would be in time. Amongst certain manly qualities he believed he possessed, there was none on which Horace prided himself more than decision of character.

"Other fellows," he would say, "half the men we

know, go talking a thing backwards and forwards till they lose the real bearings of the case. They swing the ship to verify her compasses till they don't know north from south, and whether they are standing on their heads or their heels. Even if they see an opening they make for it too late, perhaps turn back to look for another, and only come to a decision in time to find both closed. That's not my way. I may do wrong, but I do it *at once*. I make up my mind, and go in without hesitating for a win. If I fail, better luck next time ; but at least, I never shrink from a shy for fear of losing my stick!"

With such sentiments it is perhaps unnecessary to observe that Mr. Maxwell found himself in a very uncomfortable and vacillating state of mind when he dressed for his "liberal half-past nine" o'clock breakfast at Plumpton Priors. Had his hand been no steadier than his intentions, he must have cut himself repeatedly while shaving, and his letters from London only served to render him more uncertain as to the course he should pursue. A large official envelope contained a communication from the Foreign Office, that would afford an excellent pretext for returning by the midday train ; but his diplomatic experience also informed him it might stand over unnoticed for the next two days without the slightest detriment to the interests of Her Majesty. If he had been really obliged to curtail his visit at short notice, he would have grumbled loudly no doubt, while acknowledging, nevertheless, a certain sensation of relief; whereas, had there been no post at all, he could have waited, as a matter of course, without any feeling of shame, to see what turn his affairs might take. Now he had it in his power to do exactly as he pleased, and what to do, for the life of him, he could not decide. It

was evident that Annie Dennison had imbibed a strong interest in his friend, even if her affections were not already inextricably involved. At the same time he could not but be conscious that in her manner to himself there lurked a something that was as far removed from indifference as it was indeed from common politeness; a something of shyness and irritation that was equivalent to dislike, and yet not the same as dislike either.

Our man of action came down to breakfast at five minutes before ten, more puzzled than he had ever been in his life.

He found two servants waiting, and no one else in the room.

"Anybody breakfasted?" he asked the butler, who offered him grill.

"Nobody but Miss Dennison, sir," answered that official. "Mr. Mortimer takes breakfast in the blue drawing-room, and Miss Dennison got hers early and is gone to make tea for him."

"No grill, thank you!" thundered Horace in accents which startled the demure footman who attended on the butler with hot plates.

"Tea?"

"No."

"Coffee?"

"Either—neither—that'll do. I say, tell my servant I shall be obliged to leave by the twelve-ten train. He must order a fly from the village at once. If Mr. Dennison does not come down before I start, make my compliments. Say I have been sent for back to London, and will write by to-night's post."

Then Horace finished his breakfast in a violent hurry, and found he did not know what to do with the time he had to spare.

He went back to his bedroom. His servant was packing, in a thorough draught, with the new housemaid, who had thrown doors and windows open, and obviously been "making hay" in the room, on her knees at the fireplace. He sought the library, and wondered how it could look so cheerless and uncomfortable. The blue drawing-room he resolved not to approach. Of course he found his grasp on the handle of the door. It would seem so unkind to go away without wishing Percy Mortimer good-bye.

With such loyal sentiments in the ascendant, it was strange he should have felt so keen a thrill of disappointment to discover that gentleman alone.

"Halloa, Maxwell!" exclaimed his friend, who, with the remains of a choice little breakfast on a spider-legged table drawn to his sofa, looked the picture of comfort, "why out of bed in the middle of the night? I thought when there was no hunting you never came down till luncheon."

"Obliged to go back to the mill," replied Maxwell, with a preoccupied air, and ears on the alert for the rustle of a dress. "Letter from the F.O. just arrived. Ought never to have come away."

"I always thought our foreign policy fatuous in the extreme," observed his friend; "but it must be very shaky indeed if it can't stand alone without your assistance for twenty-four hours. What's happened? Is Prester John coming over for the Derby? Hang it, Horace, you'll have to take him to Cremorne!"

"I didn't come to chaff," answered Maxwell, rather sulkily. "I came to wish you good-bye, and to ask if I could do anything for you in London?"

"Yes, you can, fifty things," said the invalid. "In the first place, I want some more books from Hookham's. I'll make you out a list in five seconds. Then I must have a pair of crutches sent down, and tell the fellow not to pad them too much under the arms. And, let me see, when you *are* in Pall Mall, you wouldn't mind calling at my lodgings and telling the people? You're not listening, old fellow. What is it?"

Maxwell's attention was obviously engrossed elsewhere. He could see what Mortimer could *not* see—Annie Dennison's hat bobbing up and down amongst the cedars outside.

"All right," he answered; "I won't forget. You shall have the padded books, and the new crutches, and everything down by to-morrow's post. Good-bye, old fellow; I mustn't stay another minute. I shall be late for my train."

In half a dozen steps he was out of the house and alongside of Annie on the terrace walk, beneath the cedars.

"Going, Mr. Maxwell?" said that young lady, with provoking good-humour, as he proffered rather an incoherent adieu. "You have paid us a very shabby visit this time."

He muttered something about business—public office—press of work—man's time not his own—ending by a marked, "wanted *there* at any-rate!"

"Meaning to imply you're not wanted *here*," said Annie, with some temper. "If you think so, you're quite right to go."

"Am I?" he asked humbly, and in rather quavering accents.

"You know best," replied Miss Annie. "I can only say we shall all be disappointed at losing you so

soon. We hoped you would have stayed till Mr. Mortimer was off the sofa."

"Mr. Mortimer—always Mr. Mortimer," thought Horace. "I wish I had broken my leg instead of Percy. Perhaps it would have been Mr. Maxwell then. Well, there's nothing for it now but to be off. Here's the fly packed and everything. Good-bye, Miss Dennison," he added, in an audible voice, and proffering his hand.

"Good-bye," she repeated, giving him her own, ungloved.

He held it just long enough to convey something more than conventional civility in the expression of his hope that they might meet in London.

She could afford to laugh, for she knew she was winning.

"People cannot help meeting in London," she answered gaily; adding, as she disappeared into the house, "I hope you don't run away from your friends in London as you do in the country!"

He couldn't make her out. All the way to the station the girl puzzled him, and so puzzling him wove the fatal web, with its imperceptible meshes, closer and closer about his heart.

CHAPTER XI

A PEARL OF PRICE

"WELL, I'm sure! One would suppose you were a young girl, my dear, waiting for a lover. That's the fourth time you've fidgeted to the window. And I think you teach your husband very bad manners, bringing his slippers into the drawing-room, as if you were going to pull his boots off yourself."

The speaker was Mrs. Dennison, sitting severe and grim under a stupendous hat plumed like a hearse, in a pretty little chamber, half study, half boudoir, opening on a garden of roses and looking over such a vale of smiling pasture, rich cornland, wood, water, and double hedgerows, as could only be seen in the very heart of merry England.

The lady thus rebuked turned a handsome, happy face on her visitor, and answered with a smile—

"I can't spoil him enough, Emily. If you only knew how good and kind he is! I feel like some draggled old ship that has been tossed and torn and buffeted, and got safe into harbour at last."

Mrs. Algernon Lexley (late Miss Blair) certainly *looked* neither torn nor draggled nor buffeted. Her commanding beauty seemed only enhanced by the unfailing cosmetics of early hours, tranquillity, and good health. She was more careful too than ever in her dress and appointments, which, without

extravagance, were in style if not in fabric those of a great lady rather than a country pastor's wife. With all her pride, Laura was enough of a coquette to know how such details set off the charms of a handsome woman in her own home, and she had determined that the man who so worshipped her, who had married her so purely and entirely for love, should never, while she could prevent it, be subject to that first disillusion which wakens the dreamer, and is too surely the beginning of the end.

Hitherto the parson's wife was a success. At the flower show, at the races, at croquet parties, cricket matches, and such festive gatherings, the county magnates never tired of asking each other, "But *have* you seen Mrs. Lexley?" And those who had seen Mrs. Lexley were loud in their praises of her eyes, her hair, her figure, her walk, and everything that was hers. The young squires felt flattered by her cold, stately recognition; their elders compared her to the Empress of the French, Mary Queen of Scots—all the celebrated beauties they had never set eyes on; and the Lord-Lieutenant himself, an old reprobate with one foot in the grave, affirmed (on oath) she was the only woman in the county who knew how to wear a shawl—and here he spoke loud enough to be overheard—or who had more manners than one of his own dairymaids.

And when the buzz of admiration was at its highest — when this gentleman held her parasol, another her gloves, and the representative of the Sovereign proffered a feeble arm to help her into her basket-carriage—she would beckon to her husband with that rare smile of hers and turn on him the light of her deep grey eyes with a look that assured him she cared for nobody's homage but his, and that her drive home with *him* in the little

basket-carriage was worth all the gaieties and triumphs of the day. She delighted him beyond measure on one occasion, when, returning from an archery meeting through deep leafy lanes in the balmy summer's evening, she broke a silence that had lasted for a mile with the following complimentary remark—

"I really think, dear, that, next to you, I like Peter better than anybody in the world."

Peter was a wilful grey pony, in shape resembling a pig, of considerable trotting ability, then plodding merrily home under Laura's guidance. Algernon Lexley, looking on its broad grey back, felt his eyes fill with tears as he thanked the Heaven that had given him this peerless woman for his very own, and wondered what he had ever done to deserve to be so happy.

He could scarcely believe sometimes that this life of intense, unbroken enjoyment was anything but a dream, from which he dreaded to awake. Every day as it passed steeped him deeper and deeper in that engrossing devotion which is not love but idolatry, and convinced him more and more that before he discovered this paragon his existence must have been a blank, as without her it would be a torture. From the hour in which she consented to marry him, Laura Blair had turned all the resources of her mind, all the attractions of her person, to the one object of making her husband madly in love with her; and the tall parson, with his university education and simple clerical habits, was utterly helpless in such hands as hers. His experience of the other sex had been limited as yet to a couple of his own ungainly sisters, to the dean's daughters,—aged respectively forty-seven and forty-five,—to the doctor's wife at Middleton, to half a

dozen red-cheeked damsels of the clothing-club pattern, and to pretty Miss Dennison, at whose feet, indeed, he had been quite prepared to fall; but of a real skilful, well-dressed, practised woman of the world he knew no more than he did of an Indian squaw or a Parisian *lorette*. The grand manner, the gracious gestures, the cool, fresh toilette, the calm, severe beauty that dominated alike senses, intellect, and heart; the trenchant remarks on friends and neighbours, sarcastic if not scornful; the implied approval of himself never openly expressed, and withheld just long enough to be ardently desired and exquisitely prized; even the mere details of dress and ornament;—all combined to bring him into that state of slavish subserviency at which a man feels how the greatest folly is perfectly compatible with the greatest happiness.

And now Mrs. Dennison, having driven over to pay one of those morning visits in which she delighted, while complaining vehemently that such taxes on time and trouble should be levied by the usages of society, sat in her friend's drawing-room, and in her usual outspoken manner took that friend seriously to task for the indulgence she lavished on her husband.

"Safe into harbour!" she repeated with something of scorn. "Safe enough, no doubt, though I don't see that you were in any peril before. And as for the harbour, there's not much amiss with that either. This is a pretty room, though I can't admire your chintz; and the house is good enough when the chimneys don't smoke. Ah, my dear, you haven't spent a winter here yet! The wind comes up that valley fit to cut you in two. Still, Laura, you have done very fairly in my opinion, and you've got *me* to thank for it."

It is possible that Mrs. Lexley, catching a glimpse of her own handsome person in an opposite mirror, may have thought that the rich hair, the deep eyes, and the clear, fair face, rather than any exertions of her former patroness, were what she had to "thank for it"; but she answered, with perfect good-humour—

"It's all far better than I deserve. I never could have believed, Emily, while I was drudging away at those music lessons in London, that I should one day receive you in my own house—and such a nice house as this. That reminds me I haven't rung for tea; I generally wait till Mr. Lexley comes in. I can't think what makes him so late."

She called him Mr. Lexley, never Algernon, to other people, and only on rare occasions to himself. All creatures are best tamed by being kept hungry. Sometimes, once in a week or so, when she whispered "Algy" in his ear, the man's strong frame fairly shivered with delight.

"That's very absurd," replied practical Mrs. Dennison. "In a small establishment like yours you should never wait for anybody. How can you make servants punctual if you don't set them the example? And now, Laura, tell me the truth. Are you as happy as you expected?"

Mrs. Lexley stole another glance at the mirror. "I think you need only look at me," she said, "for an answer to that question."

"Looks count for nothing," answered her friend. "You happen to have a fair skin, and a woman with a fair skin might be at death's door, and nobody a bit the wiser, as far as her looks go. I suppose you *are* tolerably happy, though,—at least, for the present,—and have got what you want?"

"I have indeed got what I want, Emily," said the other in a low, earnest voice; "what I longed for with a longing it is hardly possible for you to conceive."

"I thought you had more sense," exclaimed Mrs. Dennison impatiently. "Really, Laura, you might know better. You can't mean what people call Love?"

"No," replied the other dreamily; "I don't mean what people call Love—I mean what people call Rest!"

"Rest!" repeated Aunt Emily, in high disdain; "there's no such thing, except when one is asleep. Rest is ruin to your health. Look at Mr. Dennison—there he sits in that leather chair till his faculties become torpid and benumbed, for mere want of motion. I often tell him, if he was obliged to order the dinner and look after the servants, he'd be a different creature, but it's no use. I may talk till I'm hoarse; he won't even go out for a walk on a day like this, and as for driving over here with *me*! I do believe you couldn't inflict on him a greater punishment."

It may be that Laura appreciated from her own knowledge Mr. Dennison's dread of the expedition on wheels, to which Aunt Emily sometimes compelled and sometimes inveigled him for his sins. In the first place, he detested an open carriage unless he drove it himself; in the second, though allowed to smoke under protest, he was not permitted, for reasons of state, to sit with his back to the horses; and in the third, there was no possible escape from the long catalogue of grievances, which on such occasions were too surely poured in his unwilling ear: no considerations of time or place were ever known to deter Mrs. Dennison from

unburthening her mind of all she had got to say, and Uncle John, embarking ruefully at her side, was only too well assured that the proposed pleasure trip would turn out a pilgrimage of penance after all.

"Gentlemen hate driving," answered Mrs. Lexley, repressing a smile as she reflected how much depended on the companion. "*Mine* chose to walk off to-day to the cricket match, instead of taking Peter. He plays so well he is sure to get a great many runs, and I should think neither he nor Mr. Perigord will have a leg to stand on by the time they get back. You won't go till you've had some tea, Emily. I'll ring for it at once."

"Do, my dear," replied Mrs. Dennison, "and order my carriage at the same time. How do you like young Perigord? I thought him a forward, disagreeable youth enough, when he paid us a visit in the winter."

"Oh no!" exclaimed the clergyman's wife, who for the present saw everything *couleur de rose*. "I assure you, Emily, he is very nice, and no trouble at all. He lives with us exactly as if he were a brother of mine, or Mr. Lexley's, and declares he never was so happy in his life."

"It's a great responsibility," observed Aunt Emily, who hated people to make the best of things. "You know they took him from Eton because he wouldn't attend to his tasks."

"My husband says he has quite as much application as any young man should have at that age," answered Laura, laughing. "It seems to me he does nothing but bowl at a solitary stump, with a net behind it; and go out rabbiting, with a short black pipe in his mouth. I suppose it's all right, and you know, dear, it's no business of mine. If I was his tutor I should make him work. I've offered to

teach him music, but he says he is too stupid to learn."

"Then he has more sense than I gave him credit for," answered Mrs. Dennison with a reproving frown, "and you have even less. You're not so young as you were, my dear, and not half so handsome; but still I don't think it a good plan for you to be guiding his black paws over the keys of a pianoforte when he ought to be at his Latin and Greek. What did Mr. Lexley say to this fine proposal?"

Her friend burst into a hearty laugh. "You don't mean, Emily, that you think there would be any danger of my falling in love with him?"

"No, I don't," replied the other. "But he might fall in love with *you*. A lad of his years is capable of falling in love with a monthly nurse, or an underhousemaid. He would never consider you were twice his age, and another man's wife."

Again Mrs. Lexley stole a look at the mirror and was comforted. More than twice his age! It was too true. And yet now when her beauty should have been on the wane, she had gained such entire and devoted affection as falls to the lot of few women in all the freshness of their prime. She felt proud to think how she was idolised by her husband, and how completely she had won that truthful, manly nature for her slave.

"No danger!" she answered gaily. "He knows his place and I know mine. It was a capital thing getting him here to read with Mr. Lexley. Two hundred a year is a great help to us, for you know, Emily, we're not rich, though we're happy. Don't go yet, dear; I see them coming up the hill."

But Mrs. Dennison was not to be persuaded. The only creatures she feared on earth were her

carriage-horses, and when these showed signs of impatience nothing could induce her to postpone her departure. Algernon Lexley and young Perigord, plodding wearily up the hill to the parsonage, met her half-way down, rolling along at the rate of twelve miles an hour, and bowed to her with as much deference as if she had been the Queen.

"Just missed that party, and a good job too!" observed the late Etonian, fanning his heated face with the cap he had doffed so obsequiously. "She's too strong a player for me, is that old lady, especially in her best hat. She simply bowls me out, before I can make any sort of defence."

"She's a kind and excellent person," answered the clergyman, "but no doubt her manner is against her. In our artificial state of society, to cultivate a pleasant manner is really part of one's duty towards one's neighbour."

"That's exactly what I say!" exclaimed the lad, "it's all *style*—style is everything. Now, when you and I went in to-day, I was cock-sure one of us would get the score; our style was so much better than those county-players. I say, Mr. Lexley, that was a grand drive of yours for the sixer, but I thought that little pot-bellied chap would have run me out—they changed the bowling then, they ought to have changed it before."

"You played WELL," said Lexley. "I wish you would put as much energy into everything as you do into cricket; you might go in and win as you liked in most of the affairs of life."

The lad looked pleased. "I have no talent except for cricket," said he modestly. "Now, Crichton at my tutor's was good at everything—what they call a universal genius."

"Nonsense!" replied the clergyman; "there's no

such thing. Energy, my good fellow, that's the whole difference between one man and another—energy and perseverance, which is only sustained energy after all!"

"That's what I'm bad at—perseverance," said the lad. "I can work at things for a week or two, then I come to a stop and don't seem to get on; after that, I chuck it up!"

"Just when you ought to stick to it," replied the clergyman. "Have you never seen a fellow climb a greased pole for a leg of mutton? He always fails within six feet of the top, and then down he comes by the run. It's the same with the prizes of life. There's a slippery place to be passed somewhere. Hold on by your teeth and eyelids when you get to it; harden your heart, make one more effort, and you WIN! Never believe in happy thoughts, inspirations, flashes of genius—what I call the romance of intellect. Nothing good was ever yet accomplished but by plodding. Native talent stands a poor chance against hard work. When you come to a difficulty, off with your coat, and hammer at it, like a blacksmith at a horseshoe! Even if it beats you, look at the strength and practice you have attained in the very defeat. Work by the clock! Don't be afraid of leaving off in the middle of a difficult passage or a happy vein of thought. Train your mind as you would your muscles. To-morrow it will serve you as well as to-day—perhaps better. Leave off fresh, but never let twenty-four hours elapse without making some progress, if it be only an inch or two towards the top of the pole. When you've won the leg of mutton, don't be disappointed to find it Leicester instead of South Down. The Victoria Cross is only a bit of bronze after all; but honour lies in success, not reward: and whether

gold, or mutton, or parsley, depend upon it the struggle is of more value than the prize. I've talked myself out of breath, and here we are at the house. Come round to the drawing-room window, and Mrs. Lexley will give us a cup of tea."

But the lad excused himself on the plea that he was too hot and dishevelled. So completely was he under the influence of her calm beauty and refined bearing, that he would no more have entered the presence of his tutor's wife in flannel trousers and a Jersey shirt than he would have gone to Court in that unceremonious costume. He retired, therefore, armed with his black pipe, for a private stroll through the laurels, while Lexley, who, notwithstanding his long walk and triumphant innings, felt as if he trod on air, walked across his lawn among the roses to seat himself on the ledge of his wife's window and drink the tea she brought him, with the zest of a true believer sipping sherbet in Paradise.

"How many runs?" said she, laying her cool white hand on his shoulder, as he sat with his body in the room and his legs in the garden. "Tell me *your* score first, and then I shall want to know who won the match."

She had taught herself to take an interest in cricket for his sake, though it must be confessed she found great difficulty in understanding how the application of wood to leather could be made a business of such importance.

"Fifty-seven off my own bat," he answered modestly. "How nice of you to care! And Perigord got forty-six. A hollow thing. We won with five wickets to go down. The boy was delighted. And what have *you* been doing, my queen, this lovely summer's day?"

"I drove Peter to Oakley," she answered, "as *you* wouldn't have him, and fussed about the village till luncheon. Old Martha looks better, but I left her some more port wine; the gamekeeper's son is worse. I sat with him a little, and he seemed to like it; but he wanted to see the parson, he said, and I promised you would be there to-morrow. He's wasted to a skeleton. Poor young man. I am afraid he is dying."

"Dying," repeated the clergyman; and a shudder crept over him, while his eyes fixed themselves on the crimson flushes of the western sky. In spite of his reflective habits and the experiences of his profession, it seemed to him that he had never before realised what that word meant—dying. It was to leave the glad sunlight and the June roses, the song of birds, the flow of waters, the lavish beauty and wealth of that outward nature, which no man was better able to appreciate. All this he had taught himself to accept; and much more than this, his faith told him there must be an equivalent in some other state of existence; but to-day, for the first time, it scared him to remember that he possessed a treasure now he could never bring himself to resign, and that dying meant to leave *her*. His sunburnt face looked drawn and pale while he spoke the ominous word once more.

"Dying. Did he tell you so? My darling, I should like to spare you from such duties and such sights as these."

"I don't mind them," she answered, taking the empty cup from his hand. "I suppose I must be very hard, but when I left the poor fellow, and felt that I had done all in my power, I never thought about him again. Peter went so well, and I came back to luncheon as if there was no such thing as

sorrow or sickness in the world. Yes, I am hard-hearted. I am sure I didn't the least mind Emily coming to wish us good-bye before she goes to London."

His face fell a little. Though her married life already counted by months, she could still play upon his feelings as easily as on the keys of her piano-forte, evoking at her will alarm, hope, sorrow, affection, despondency—all the various chords that constitute the *fantasia* of a man's heart. Thus it was that she retained her dominion over his every thought and action, keeping him in the thraldom of a lover to his mistress, rather than yielding him the deference exacted by husband from his wife.

"You are quite right," he answered, with a forced laugh. "A hard heart is the first element of comfort in man or woman. Our affections give us more pain than pleasure, after all."

She detected in his constrained tone the pain she caused, and, womanlike, applied the salve when she had sufficiently probed the wound.

"It's easy enough to be hard-hearted about old Martha or poor Jim Loder," she said. "When one *really* cares for people it's very different. Fancy if Peter was ill!"

His face brightened.

"That would indeed be a trial," he laughed. "You are fonder of Peter than any creature on earth."

"Bar one," she whispered, passing her hand over his dark, close-cut hair. "Bar one, as those horrid people say at the races. Peter is simply perfection. If it wasn't for somebody, who is very easily put out, he would be first favourite."

"And if somebody who is very easily put out

were ill, would you be anxious and unhappy?" he asked with a loving smile.

"I should go mad," she answered, in a quick, terrified whisper. "There are some things one cannot talk about, even in jest. What would my life be without *you*? But, for goodness' sake, let us get out of the dolefuls. We want that troublesome boy to cheer us up. Why does he not come in for his tea before it's cold?"

Now the reason Mr. Perigord chose to abstain from that refreshment has been already given. On the present occasion, after a hard day's cricket, he preferred the solace of his short pipe in a favourite lounge outside the garden of the parsonage, where he sat himself down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and proceeded to enjoy that greatest of all luxuries, tobacco after labour. While the smoke-wreaths, flavoured with Cavendish, curled about his sleek young head, he reviewed with considerable satisfaction the day's doings and his own prowess as displayed in the cricket-field. It was pleasant to recall the silence and courage with which he stood up to Armstrong's formidable bowling, the steadiness of his defence, the style of his play—he piqued himself especially on his style—and that brilliant hit to leg that scored him a four. Then, when they put on Dodge with his slows at the other end, he was proud to remember that he made six in the very first over, causing that wary professional an infinity of anxiety and distress, before his wicket went down at last to a twister that came in like a corkscrew. He could still hear the clapping of hands that greeted each brilliant hit, each well-considered block; could still feel the glow of triumph absorbing that enthusiastic applause which is so grateful to youth, and is nowhere so freely accorded as at the

noble game of cricket. To use his own expression, the young gentleman felt he had "come out freely" and fancied himself accordingly.

Thoroughly satisfied with his past, his present, and his future, he looked back to Eton without regret, admitting that the intimate society of his tutor, whom he liked, and his tutor's wife, whom he admired, was more than an equivalent for the boating, the bathing, the fun, good fellowship, and constant excitement of that delightful school. His father, too, had consented that he should go into the army, and Lexley gave him strong hopes that he would be able to pass his examinations. Before him lay that long vista of the future which seems to lead down sunny glades into the distant fairyland. He saw himself grown, whiskered, self-possessed, wearing Her Majesty's uniform, and matured into his own beau-ideal of what a gentleman should be. The daydream was delightful, the tobacco soothing, swarms of gnats wheeled in the evening sunbeams, a large humble-bee droned and buzzed among the wildflowers at his feet, his eyes swam, his head nodded—in another minute he would have been fast asleep.

But even as his sight began to fail, all his faculties were aroused by the figure of a man prowling behind the hedge that skirted the field in which he sat. A well-clad figure, not the least like a rustic lad birds'-nesting, or a village shoemaker out for a stroll. On the contrary, this individual was dressed only too respectably; but in clothes of a cut such as the upper classes do not generally wear in the country. Our young friend was unusually sharp-sighted. He could distinguish through the leafy luxuriance of summer blackthorn that this creeping, crouching figure was attired in a

black frock-coat and shiny satin waistcoat, crossed by a bright gold chain, "like a fellow who keeps a roulette table," thought the Etonian, "or a Newmarket tout in his Sunday clothes."

The man seemed unconscious that he was observed, and, parting the branches of the tangled hedge that concealed him, scanned the parsonage and its grounds with a long, searching gaze. Having satisfied himself with this scrutiny, he proceeded to leave the field, still crouching along under the fence towards the gate by which he must have entered.

"Burglar?" said the young gentleman to himself. "No—too well dressed. Land surveyor? Never saw a land surveyor with so good a hat. Escaped lunatic, perhaps? Hardly, for he carries an umbrella, and no man ever saw a madman with an umbrella. I should like to have a nearer look. I'll just nip round and meet him as he comes into the lane."

Shaking the ashes out of his pipe, the lad vaulted lightly over a stile, crossed the adjoining meadow at speed, and arrived at the gate apparently by accident, just as the stranger laid his hand upon its latch.

"Fine evening, sir," said the young gentleman with his usual composure. "Perhaps you are not aware that you are trespassing?"

The man's habit seemed to be to look everywhere but in the face of the person who addressed him.

"I beg pardon," he answered courteously enough. "I thought I should find a footpath in the next field. I fancy I must have lost my way. Perhaps you can kindly inform me where I am."

"You see the copse at the end of the lane?"

said Perigord. "Take the first turn to the right, and it will bring you out on the highroad, opposite the ninety-seventh milestone from London; then you will know exactly where you are."

The man's face flushed, and he scowled as if disposed to resent this piece of impertinence. Glancing at the lad's agile figure, however, he seemed to think better of it, and replied good-humouredly—

"London is a long way off, and I should like to take my bearings a little more accurately than from the meridian of Greenwich. Can you tell me whose is that pretty house I see peeping through the trees?"

"Yes, I can," answered Perigord, volunteering, however, no further information.

The stranger broke into a laugh.

"Excuse me, sir," said he, "you seem to be a young gentleman of great originality, but particularly indisposed to impart information. A cricketer, I presume, by your dress. May I ask you if you played a successful match to-day?"

"Certainly," answered Perigord. "I don't mind admitting we gave the yokels an awful licking. A hundred and forty-seven runs with five wickets to go down."

"And the gentleman who lives in that pretty house got the score, if I am rightly informed—a clerical gentleman, as I understand, lately married to a lady of considerable personal attractions?"

"Well, if you know all about it, I don't see why you should ask me," said Perigord.

"I am not entirely a stranger to the neighbourhood of Middleton," continued the other, still averting his eyes from the youth's face. "If I am right in my conjecture as to the locality of the

parsonage, I know pretty nearly where I am. I wish you a good afternoon, sir."

Thus speaking, the man took his hat off and proceeded in the direction of the London road, at a pace and with a manner that seemed to decline further conversation, while young Perigord betook himself to the parsonage, very much puzzled as to the social standing of his new acquaintance.

In talking him over during dinner, Mr. Lexley suggested he might be a collector of subscriptions for the Mission to the Feejee Islands, while his wife decided he was travelling about with a prospectus for a map of the county.

CHAPTER XII

DUTY

"YOU should have put me at long-on, sir, yesterday, not cover-point. We are used to it, you know."

Thus speaking, young Perigord looked up in his tutor's face from the less congenial studies on which he was vainly trying to fix his attention.

"I'll go into that question as fully as you please after luncheon," answered Lexley. "In the meantime do try and remember that *elenchos* is not Latin for 'emeralds,' and that Juvenal wrote his Satires at a time when Roman society had reached the lowest stage of profligacy and disorder."

"How he pitches into the women!" said the pupil. "He must have known a lot of bad ones, to describe them as he does."

"*Quum virides gemmas collo circumdedit*," read the tutor, with all a tutor's roll and inflection on the sonorous hexameters. "Go on construing, there's a good fellow. Not literally, you know, but giving me the sense in the best English you can."

Perigord complied, acquitting himself creditably enough, but ere long wandered again from the text in his usual discursive manner.

"Why should he say a rich woman is so intolerable? I know lots of rich women. I don't think they're a bit worse than poor ones."

"It's the display, the affectation of wealth in a woman that is detestable," replied Lexley. "But I grant you he lashes the sex with unsparing sarcasm, and the diatribes addressed to his friend, who is about to marry, are doubtless enough to frighten a bachelor; yet people *did* marry in Rome just the same," added the tutor reflectively, while a pale handsome face seemed to pass like a ghost before his eyes, "as they always have, and always will, let philosophers and satirists rail their bitterest. Depend upon it, young one, the human instinct is right."

"For my part, I like to see a lady with jewels," continued the lad. "Emeralds round her neck, pearls in her ears, rings on her fingers"—

"And bells on her toes," added Lexley. "What nonsense we are talking! Go on with the Satire."

"That same fellow was prowling about again this morning," observed the young gentleman inconsequently, at the close of another fifty lines. "I saw him from my bedroom window, and would have gone out to give him a piece of my mind only I was shaving at the time."

"Shaving?" repeated his tutor with a laugh, frankly echoed by the pupil.

"Shaving! Yes, sir, shaving—though I don't think I got much off but the lather. You see, when I left Eton my aunt gave me a fiver, and the first thing I did was to buy a case of razors, marked for every day in the week. Ain't they sharp! I'll lend you one if you like. When *you* shave it's to cut your beard off. When *I* shave it's to make mine grow. Perhaps some day I shall have whiskers as big as yours."

"And wish from your heart your cheeks were bare again. I do, every morning of my life. But there is nothing about whiskers in Juvenal."

"I must tell you how this fellow prowled round the house, and then I'll go on construing. He came quietly through the garden gate — kept off the gravel, peeped into every window on the ground-floor, and when he heard Mary undoing the dining-room shutters, bolted like a shot. If I wasn't a steady young man, and a comfort to my parents, I should think he was looking for me from Scotland Yard. As it is, I believe he is after your spoons. I say, wouldn't it be fun to catch him at it? We could duck him in the long pond and let him go. The only thing is, it might frighten Mrs. Lexley.'

"I don't think it would!" answered her husband. "If it came to a case of house-breaking, I believe she would prove the bravest of the three. But I've no fear of that kind. You and I and James are garrison enough to repel any ordinary assault, to say nothing of old Robin the gardener with his rusty gun. Besides, there's no temptation — there's nothing here for a man to steal."

"Then, what can the fellow want?" said Perigord. "If I see him again, sir, mayn't I order him off, and put him out of the grounds by main force if he refuses to go?"

"Certainly not," replied the tutor, laughing. "The man may be a most respectable person, connected with half a dozen philanthropical institutions, for all we know to the contrary. Or if he has any evil design, which I doubt extremely, he may be what you would call an awkward customer to tackle. And if you and I pitched into him together, it would hardly look well in the *Middleton Herald*, for tutor and pupil to be summoned in a case of assault — two to one. Let him alone. You're tired of Juvenal. Now we'll go into the

Franco-Prussian war for half an hour, and then it will be time for luncheon."

So they got out the map of Europe, before it had been rearranged to commemorate the triumph of discipline and foresight over ignorance and insubordination, tracking the marches and countermarches of the contending armies, from the first shot fired at Saarbrück to the crowning catastrophe of Sedan—a study which seemed more to young Perigord's taste than the classic vituperations of the Roman satirist. He was never tired of dwelling on the strength of the Prussian artillery, on the gallantry of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, with their tasteful uniform and their beautiful little horses. Above all, on these indomitable Uhlans, who proved themselves, under all circumstances, and in every kind of country, the eyes and ears and feelers of the divisions to which they were attached.

The luncheon-bell rang much too soon for this assiduous student, but Lexley, true to his system of working by the clock, rolled up the map, shut the book, and proclaimed that reading was over for the day.

"I never saw the roses so beautiful," said the happy curate to his wife, as, pacing slowly across the lawn after luncheon, he drew a deep breath of enjoyment while he inhaled draughts of fragrance from those sweetest of flowers. "It must be that I have got the queen of roses here. My darling, I hope it is not wrong to say so; but where *you* are there to me is Paradise."

"I don't know whether it's wrong," she answered with a proud, pleased smile; "but there's no question it's exceedingly silly. You may admire the roses as much as you like, for they are beautiful. I do think that for flowers, scenery, peace and quiet, all that

makes real comfort, this is the nicest little spot in the whole world."

He looked inexpressibly gratified. Had it not been his highest hope, his dearest wish, to render her lot a bright one, and was not this an implied admission that he had succeeded?

"And you cannot think of any alteration, any improvement?" he asked, looking across the luxuriant garden, with its masses of colour, its wealth of green, its undulating, close-shaven sward, to the creeper-clad porch, the oriel windows, the gables, abutments, and picturesque ins and outs of the pretty parsonage. "You don't want a patent mowing-machine, a wider coach-house, a larger drawing-room? Laura, it makes me so happy to think you are satisfied with your life!"

"Am I the only contented woman you ever heard of since Eve grew so tired of her garden?" said she with a bright smile. "Listen, and I'll tell you the truth. I should like every day—every day—to pass just as it does now. It need not always be summer; but I don't think winter could be bleak or dismal here. I should never want the slightest change nor interruption in our life, our habits, our pursuits. I should wish us to glide on together just like this, till we reached the bottom of the hill and tottered into the grave arm in arm."

Glancing in her face, he thought he had never seen it so solemn, nor heard her voice so earnest and impressive.

"Are you serious, my darling?" he asked in a low tender whisper.

But Laura's melting moods were never of long duration. "Serious?" she repeated, with a light laugh. "It would make anybody serious to see that boy bowling with such perseverance at his cricket-

stump on this broiling day. Tell me, dear, used you to practise so unremittingly before you attained that proficiency in the noble game for which 'our parson' is as celebrated as for his sermons, and—and his attention to his poor? What babies men are! But that reminds me we ought to be starting for Oakley. I'm coming part of the way with you. Yes, I am. Don't you see, sir, I've got on my thick walking boots, and have looped my skirt up to keep it out of the dust? I shall turn back at the end of Oakley Lane."

He cast a glance of lover-like admiration at the shapely foot in its neat and dainty *chaussure*, at the flowing white draperies so tastefully arranged round the stately figure — at the proud, beautiful face, looking so pure and delicate in the sunlight that trembled through the summer leaves, and felt, as many a man has felt before, a thrill of rapture, dashed with an awful sense of insecurity, while he marvelled how this angel could have come down from heaven to be his own! For him the gilt was yet on the gingerbread, the paint on the toy, the dew on the flower, fresh and fragrant as when it first bloomed in Paradise. He never forgot that walk through the meadows to Oakley Lane. The may on the hedges, the deep blue sky, the dazzling green and gold of fertile fields knee-deep in grass and buttercups, the altered note of the cuckoo, the chatter of jays and murmur of wood-pigeons in the adjoining woods, the drone and buzz of insect life, the swallows darting down the stream; the very butterflies, primrose and red-and-black, that flitted across their path.

Above all, the queenly figure in white moving smoothly by his side, whose voice was sweeter in his ears than the wild bird's carol, whose smile

was brighter to his eyes than the summer sunshine.

Strange, that its memory should afterwards have absorbed even that of the other walk through the laurels at Plumpton, when he asked her to be his wife! though we may be sure this episode had not been forgotten, and was alluded to more than once between the gate of the parsonage and Oakley Lane.

They talked like lovers still, though they had been married for months. They went for the hundredth time into those endless details of hope and fear, uncertainty and self-depreciation, which are so absurd, so touching, and so uninteresting to all but the two people concerned. Once, leaning against a stile, he sitting on the step at her knees, she laid her hand caressingly on his shoulder while she volunteered more of her sentiments and private opinions than she had ever revealed before. They were shaded by a huge old oak in the shining brightness of its first full leaf. Before them rose a range of wooded hills, from which peeped the hamlet of Oakley, with its tapering spire. At their feet a trout-stream murmured and gurgled under its alder-fringed banks. From an adjoining copse blackbird and thrush were straining their throats in rivalry of woodland music. Two or three sheep, with quiet, stupid faces, cropped the herbage undisturbed; and the cattle at the end of the field were rising slowly and laboriously for their afternoon feed. There was hardly a breath of air stirring, nor a streak of white in the blue, cloudless sky. Everything denoted peace, prosperity and repose; the rich pasture, the luxuriant foliage, the golden haze that mellowed all the wooded distance, the flocks and herds, the thin smoke curling upward

from a hidden cottage, the very tug and nibble of those confiding sheep — all were in keeping with the calm, quiet, matchless beauty of an English summer's day.

"There is nothing like this in the world," said Laura, furling her parasol, while she turned to meet the breeze. "Nothing! Everywhere abroad it's the same—a scorching sun that one can only escape by remaining indoors, or a piercing cold that freezes the very marrow in one's bones. There's no medium. To be tolerably comfortable, you must either sit in a stove or an ice-house. I've been all over the world, dear. Take my word for it, there's no place like England, and in England there's no place like Oakley Lane."

"I think so, *now*," he answered, looking fondly up in her face. "But before I knew you, I had a great inclination to travel."

"And before I knew *you*," she replied, "I did travel without the slightest inclination to do so. I can scarcely believe I am the same woman when I look back on my past life."

She shuddered while she spoke, and pressed her hand heavier on his shoulder as if to assure herself the present was a reality.

"You must have had a hard time of it, my darling," said he. "Perhaps had it not been so, I might never have prevailed on one so beautiful and so gifted to become a quiet parson's wife. Never mind. So much the more reason for making the most of her now I have got her!"

An unaccustomed tear trembled on her eyelid, but she dashed it away with a gesture of impatience bordering on contempt.

"How good to me you are!" she exclaimed; "and how different from men in general! You

never seem to be thinking of yourself. You've no vices, no crotchets, and no bad habits. You're six feet high, and you don't smoke. It's nice of you to be six feet high and not to smoke! Do you know, the first thing I liked about you was your utter want of self-consciousness? You came to the pianoforte when I was playing, and never even looked in the glass. I don't believe there was another man in the room, except Mr. Dennison, who could have passed it without a squint."

"Not even Maxwell?" observed Lexley, who, with the keen-sightedness of love, had experienced certain little twinges of jealousy regarding his friend Horace.

"Not even Mr. Maxwell," she repeated. "He's just as conceited as the rest of his sex, and I am convinced no consideration on earth could make him forget Mr. Maxwell. And yet, if you had not been there, I daresay I should have thought him very nice."

"How you could like me best is more than I can understand," said the clergyman, in perfect sincerity, and with a gravity befitting the occasion.

"Don't you think I know diamonds from paste?" she replied, laughing. "Recollect, I have worn both in my time. Ah! if you could realise what it is to find out the jewels are only imitation after all! It is just as if I were to discover you had got another wife and had been playing false with me ever since we met. These are the things that drive the poor women we read of to jump from Waterloo Bridge. What happens to a man in such a case? Does he break his heart, or does he order more diamonds and take his chance?"

"I don't know about breaking his heart,"

answered her husband in a low, thick voice; "but I believe if such a judgment overtook me I could never lift my head amongst my fellow-creatures again. Fancy the sin—the shame—the scorn of one's parish—the disgrace to one's calling! Laura, it would drive me mad. I cannot bear even to think of it."

"Then don't think of it," she replied cheerfully. "You are bound on a melancholy errand as it is. Now, dearest, attend to me. Have you a pencil? Of course not. Here, take mine, and the back of this letter. What is the use of your pockets? Make a little list of that poor lad's wants, and I can drive over with the things to-morrow. You won't have time to see Martha, but though she grumbles a good deal, she is *really* better. I shall go straight home. I wonder if that undefeated boy has bowled his stump down yet. God bless you, Algy dear! It's a painful business, but it will comfort the poor old people very much. Don't hurry back. In this beautiful weather we can't dine too late. No—I won't stay another moment. Good-bye."

But she turned before she had gone ten paces, to observe, "there was a quarter of lamb for dinner, and wouldn't he like best to have it cold?"

As the parson climbed the hill, he looked back more than once, till the graceful figure in its white dress had undulated out of sight, then, while his accustomed limbs swung into their regular stride, a still small voice seemed to whisper that he, a servant of the Church, had committed too much of his happiness to the keeping of a mortal like himself; nor was it without a sense of self-reproach that he repeated aloud, "Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also."

In less than half an hour he crossed the green

of Oakley village. The first person he met was old Loder turning out of the public-house with a short pipe in his mouth.

Scanning the keeper, he was aware that, contrary to his usual habits, the man had been drinking, and seemed in the half-torpid, morose condition of those who in their trouble turn for consolation to beer.

"Fine arternoon, sir," observed Loder, avoiding the parson's eye, as he made a snatch at his hat, and tried to shuffle past the tall form that stood directly in his path.

"Fine enough," was the curt answer. "But no matter for that now. How's Jim?"

"Don't you get talking to me about Jim," replied the old man fiercely. "It's Jim here and Jim there, again and again and again—doctors and parsons, parsons and doctors. What's the good on 'em? They can't none on 'em keep the life in the lad. Oh, I don't know nothin' about Jim! But it's a rare time this is for the young pheasants."

Lexley put his hand on the other's shoulder. "I'm going on to see Jim," said he sternly. "It's when folks are in trouble their friends should stick by them. If I was lying sick down yonder across the brook, wouldn't you find time to come and learn what kind of a fight I could make of it? I'd be sorry if you wouldn't—and am I not to do the same by you and yours?"

"God bless ye, Mr. Lexley!" muttered the keeper in thick, hoarse accents. "You're a man, you are, an' I've said so scores an' scores of times. Don't you take no notice of me; I'm most off my head, I am, with this here trouble up at home. The missis, she'll thank ye kindly; and—and the lad, he wor a sayin', not half an hour ago, 'Father,' says

"I'm going on to see Jim"

he, 'what's gone with the parson? He'll be up to-day, for sure.' So I went an' had a pint—and I ought to be in Marbury Dales now—and I thank you kindly. You're a *man*, you are. An' doan't ye think no more o' what I said."

With which incoherent remarks, and an application of the ends of his limp red neckcloth, ostensibly rather to wipe the sweat from his face than the tears from his eyes, the old man's gaiters carried him sturdily past the public-house, to return to his sylvan duties in Marbury Dales.

Lexley strode up the village street with saddened face. Two or three idlers were, as usual, in the blacksmith's shop; he detected in their looks a consciousness of his errand and a sympathy for the hopeless state of the lad he had come to visit. Even the schoolmistress, though with new ribbons in her cap, made him a respectful curtsey without the bright smile that usually accompanied her greeting.

Poor Dame Loder, looking ten years older than when he saw her last, wiped a chair with her apron and set it ready for the parson, as with eyes full of tears she welcomed him on the door-sill.

"Any better?" asked her visitor, removing his hat courteously. "I met your husband as I came up street just now, Mrs. Loder, and was sorry to see him so downhearted. While there's life there's hope, you know; and even when that hope fails it is only exchanged for another—brighter, holier, and never to be taken away."

Though the tears were coursing down the mother's cheeks, she made shift to answer—

"Indeed, sir, an' that's God's truth; but it's hard to bear—hard to bear. An' my master, he takes on worse than the poor lad, as is patient like a lamb to

the slaughter. An' there's wine an' doctor's stuff, and grave-clothes to make ready, an', oh dear! oh dear! my head's that bad I could set down in that theer arm-cheer and wish as I'd never been born."

"Sit down in it, then," said Lexley, "and have your cry out; it will do you good. Afterwards you shall take me to poor Jim, and we'll see if we can't make it a little easier for him between us, even if we do no good. Don't be in a hurry, Mrs. Loder; my time is yours, and it would worry the boy to see his mother with such a tearful face."

This last consideration served probably to rouse that courage of endurance which is seldom dormant for long in a woman's breast. Mrs. Loder, remembering with satisfaction that she had tidied up her son's room, recovered herself bravely and recalled her company manners for the occasion.

"I ask your pardon, I am sure, sir," said she, with another curtsey, "but this here trouble puts all beside out of my poor head. I hope as how your good lady is well, sir; and will you please to make my duty and thank her kindly for all favours, and Jim's too?—though it seems to me as it's only half of Jim as is lying in that theer bed."

It was indeed a very different form from that of the agile, well-grown youth of a few months ago, the best cricketer and fastest runner in the parish. Those active limbs were limp and helpless now; the poor thin hand that lay outside the coverlet had wasted to transparency, the sharp, delicate features seemed carved in ivory, and the large eyes burned with unearthly fire as they turned on the parson that eager, wistful look which is too surely a forerunner of death.

Lexley was little given to weeping, and no stranger to the deathbeds of rich and poor, but he

kept his tears back with an effort while the boy tried to thank him for coming, in the faint whispers of utter exhaustion.

"Father said as you wouldn't keep away," gasped poor Jim, "an' I knowed your voice, sir, whiles you was a-talkin' to mother in the door. D'ye mind, sir, when us played Middleton Eleven last Plumpton feast? Doctor he says as I'm bound to mend now the warm weather has set in; but I'm thinking, sir, maybe I'll never play one of Mr. Dodge's slows again."

This is no place in which to repeat the serious and well-chosen words in which the clergyman reminded him that the issues of life and death are with One of whom he had first heard at his mother's knee, before he went to Sunday school; that the true courage of manhood consists in accepting the award of that One for good and for evil without a murmur, professing only gratitude for the past, resignation for the present, and humble hope for the future; that pain and sin are the very conditions of this short span men call existence; that life is but to do a day's work honestly, and death, to come home for a day's wages when the sun goes down—not as of right, but because of the great unspeakable price that has purchased all who bow the head and bend the knee.

Poor Jim listened as a wayfarer listens to the directions that must guide him through the wilderness. Though his breath came fainter and fainter, the clasp of his wan fingers lying in the parson's hand denoted rapt attention; and his mother observed that her son's eyes followed her movements through the room fondly, yet helplessly and without meaning, as they did when he was a rosy baby boy in his cradle. She never knew exactly

how they became fixed and dim, for it was already twilight ere the faint pressure of that failing hand relaxed, and from the dark corner by the bedside came forth the parson's firm and serious voice, saying—

"Your son is dead, yet liveth: take comfort, therefore; come, kneel down and pray with me to God."

The stars were out, and the last gleam of sunset had faded in the west, when Lexley started for his homeward walk, leaving in that humble cottage a dead son and a mourning mother. Mourning, yet not altogether without comfort and without hope. "At such times as these," he thought, while he passed gently between the high luxuriant hedges, through all the wealth and fragrance of the summer night, "a man feels how little he can depend on his own strength, his own energy, when affliction attacks him by means of his affections, and in the person of another; then it is he must look upward for assistance from without, leaning confidently on the arm that cannot fail; trusting implicitly to the hand that is ever stretched, when all other hope has passed away. If I could only reproduce, in my sermon next Sunday, the scene I have witnessed even now, how many hearts could I touch, how many consciences could I rouse, how many souls could I awaken to the one great truth of which life and labour are but the daily expositions! May God help me to do my duty by these poor people, if it be but in humble thanks for the lot He has given me —surely the happiest lot on earth! and if I should ever be stricken to the dust, for my many sins and shortcomings, may He give me strength to bear my chastisement, not with human pride, but Christian resignation!"

Even while he thus reflected, a shudder crept to his very marrow, and he walked fiercely on, for he dared not think of one possible affliction that his rebellious heart whispered neither hope nor faith could render him strong enough to endure.

Half-way down the hill under Oakley village, Lexley met a slowly moving figure, looming large and square in the darkness. He recognised it by the gun on its shoulder for the bereaved father of poor Jim Loder. The keeper came on with firm, dogged steps, and would have passed without speaking, but that Lexley again stood in his path.

"What's up?" exclaimed the old man fiercely. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Lexley! Good-night, sir." But he stopped and faced round, letting the butt of his gun rest on the ground, and trembling in every limb.

"God's will be done!" said the parson, taking his hat off and looking reverently up towards the stars. "Say the words after me, Loder, and go straight home. There are others need comfort as well as you."

"God's will be done!" repeated the old man in a broken voice, and moved on without another word; but to Lexley, looking after him through the dusk, it seemed that his gait was already enfeebled and his stature shrunken by a span.

And now our parson increased his pace, setting himself resolutely to get home. In honest truth he was longing for the restorative of his wife's sweet smile and kindly greeting; nor, with the healthy appetite of a strong, active man, was the prospect of a dinner, at this late hour, by any means displeasing. His spirits rose as he neared his own dwelling. He had come from a scene of solemn and sacred sorrow, but he felt he had done his duty, and however sym-

pathetic a man's heart may be, the afflictions of others cannot affect it like its own. By the time he reached the stile, now scarcely visible in the darkness, at which Laura turned back in the afternoon, he could have kissed the ground she had trodden, could have run, or leapt, or sung aloud, or committed any other absurdity, for very joy.

Nearing the turn of a lane that led to Oakley Station, his ear caught the roll of wheels, and a hundred yards farther on he recognised the broad grey back of Peter trotting merrily home with the basket-carriage. His servant, recognising him, pulled up and touched his hat.

"Where the—where on earth have you been at this time of night?" asked the clergyman, running over a thousand wild speculations in his mind to account for this apparition.

"Oakley Station," answered the groom, who was a man of few words, handing his master the reins.

"And who sent you to Oakley Station? Go on, Peter," continued the clergyman.

"Missus drove there to catch the train, and I was to bring the carriage back and let you know," was the answer.

It was lucky for Peter that his trotting powers, as I have already stated, were of the swiftest. In a very few minutes he stood at the door of the parsonage, untouched by the whip, but blowing hard and covered with lather; while Lexley, white and scared, rushed into the drawing-room, looking about for the note he felt sure his wife must have written to explain her departure.

Here he found Perigord, calmly waiting for dinner, the less impatiently that at six o'clock he had fortified nature with a heavy tea.

His composure acted as a sedative. "I've a message for you, sir, from Mrs. Lexley. She's off to London—went by the seven-fifty. She is to write and tell you all about it. I hope there's not much the matter, but she looked very pale when she started."

"Matter! pale!" gasped the other. "She's not ill, is she?"

"Neuralgia," answered the young gentleman. "Subject to it, she said, and gone off to the only man in London who can do any good. Squirts something into the nerve. My sister Jane has it too, but they give her port wine and sandwiches."

The explanation was so far satisfactory that Lexley sat down to dinner reassured. The whole business, though unusual, seemed natural enough, and he was conscious of no other feeling than a vague surprise when his pupil, rising from the table, observed meditatively, "That prowling vagabond was about again this afternoon, and, would you believe it, sir, the scoundrel had the impudence to stop Mrs. Lexley's carriage and speak to her, as she drove out at the gate!"

CHAPTER XIII

SELF-SACRIFICE

HEN Lexley, bound on his professional mission, parted from her at the stile under the oak-tree, his wife sauntered slowly homeward, enjoying with all the appreciation of a vigorous nature the glittering sunshine, woodland music and balmy odours of that bright summer afternoon. She had been perfectly sincere when she told him how infinitely she preferred the climate and scenery of England to all she had visited elsewhere. Coming in sight of her own pretty house with its trim lawn, blazing flower-beds, and rose-curtained windows, she could not forbear a quiet smile of heartfelt happiness and content. "What a dear little harbour of refuge it is!" she murmured. "How peaceful, how orderly, how thoroughly English and comfortable! Nothing to worry or disturb one. No near neighbours to intrude at unseasonable hours. Mrs. Dennison goes to London to-day. I never want to see London again! Yes, I am as happy as anybody can expect to be. I have everything I used to wish for—rest, security, enough to live on, and a husband, poor dear, who worships the very ground I tread.

"What do you want with me?
and why are you here?"

How kind he is, and unselfish—how honest and brave and strong! Am I in love with him? I almost think I am—at least, I should be, if I were a little less certain of his liking me, or if I had the slightest fear of losing him. Happily there is no chance of that. As I told him in the garden, we shall probably twaddle away the rest of our lives together, without change or interruption! Not an exciting future! But I have had enough of excitement. I hope I may never know what that hateful word means again. I hope I may never leave my dear little home till they carry me out of it to the"—

She stopped and tottered as if she had been shot, turning sick and faint, so that she must have fallen, had not a man, dressed in black, caught her in his arms and propped her against the gate, at which he seemed to have been waiting her arrival.

On no previous occasion in the whole of her unhappy life had she such need of that courage and fortitude on which she prided herself. Those qualities now stood her in good stead. She confronted the man, with a face from which every vestige of colour had departed, but that was yet calm, resolute, and unmoved, while, though she gasped for breath, moistening her dry lips with her tongue before she could get out the words, there was the old hard ring in them he remembered so well, as she demanded fiercely—

"Ferdinand! Mr. Delancy! What do you want with me? and why are you here?"

For one wild moment the fancy crossed her brain that this might be the disembodied spirit of her husband, returned from its appointed place. It is not too much to say that, facing him with scornful and defiant eyes, she wished it could be so. His

answer—of the earth, earthy—sufficiently dispelled such an illusion.

"What do I want, Laura? Come, that's putting rather too much side on! What do you suppose a man wants when he travels from the other end of everywhere to find his own wife?"

"Don't dare to call me Laura!" she flashed out, goaded by the thought of that other voice, resting so fondly on the familiar name. "Don't dare to say I am your wife! As God shall judge me, that accursed contract was dissolved for ever when we parted in the States! Have you no pity—no sense of right—no spark of honour—no self-respect? Man! for the love of Heaven go your way, and let me go mine!"

He lit a cigar, very carefully, and with the fixed smile she so hated about his lips. The accustomed action, the scar on his left hand, the ring she remembered he had always worn, the various details of his dress and person, affected her with a horror and loathing that almost mastered reason. In such a mood women have done murder from a mere animal impulse of escape.

"I'm not much of a lawyer," said he, puffing a volume of smoke in her face with perfect composure, "but neither am I quite such a fool as I look. When people are legally married, I've always understood they remain man and wife till they are legally divorced. I may be wrong,—I generally am,—but that's my opinion, and I mean to act upon it. You're not listening, Mrs. Delancy."

She was not. With an effort of which few natures would have been capable, she had summoned all her powers of heart and brain to confront the position and make the best of it. Not for herself—that was past and done with now—but for another

—for the man she loved—how dearly, till this miserable moment, she had never realised!

Leaning on the gate, for her knees still trembled, she passed her hand across her face, and mastering with admirable courage the emotions of horror, disgust, and despair, that racked her to the core, turned calmly to her tormentor, and spoke in her ordinary quiet tones—

"Forgive me. You know as well as I do that I never expected to see you again. Your apparition —for I can call it nothing else—upset me, and I daresay I said all sorts of things I didn't mean. I had heard nothing of you since we parted, till that ship drifted ashore without a soul on board. I thought that you—you had not escaped with your life."

"Thought I was dead, and a good job too?" he answered, with his mocking laugh. "I must say you did look disappointed, and skeered as well. However, business is business. Here's a precious muddle you've been and made! Married again, as I understand! A parson, too! and me not rubbed out after all! It's as good as a play. I couldn't help laughing when I read it in the English papers; but I thought I'd take an early opportunity of looking in after I got home, just to see how you were getting along."

"My life is tolerably comfortable," she answered, with little outward show of emotion. "Mine has been an uneventful career since we parted. Yours, I suppose, a constant succession of ups and downs, terminating, as usual, with a run of ill luck?"

"That's about it," said he, not without a sense of gratification that she should care to ask. "More downs than ups, and more bad luck than good.

When I left New York I made tracks at once for 'Frisco. Bless ye, I'd better have gone to the only place I ever heard of that could be hotter. I was no more use there than a baby. Fellows loafing round, before, behind, all about you, the moment you touched a card, and every second player with one *bower* at least in his sleeve, and a couple of aces in his hat—not to mention the Derringer ready to loose off at sight if you ventured to object. They'd have cleared away the whole of my pile, only I wouldn't give 'em a show. I saw with half an eye that I should be played out before I'd been a week in the town, so I up stick and away for Sacramento. I did well there, and might have done better if only I'd been a bigger rogue than my partner. You remember him—the long yellow chap we had such a shine about? One blazing hot morning I missed him from breakfast, and the first news I got of the skunk was to tell me he had been seen on the stage for North Fork at daybreak, with as many traps on board as would have foundered a steamboat. I confess I was fairly treed then. Beyond a five-dollar note, the clothes I stood upright in, and a diamond breastpin, I hadn't a blessed cent in the world. I wanted you, my dear, and the old piano, very bad. Ah! you never know the worth of a thing till you've lost it."

She darted at him one glance of concentrated hate and scorn. Great Heavens! could this mean, heartless villain belong to the same creation as that other man with whom she had parted a few short hours ago? She wondered vaguely how she could ever have borne her lot in the old miserable days; but she commanded herself with a power of repression and self-restraint beyond all praise. That other, she thought, must be spared at any sacrifice.

There was no duty, no interest, left for her on earth but this.

Delancy smoked on, as it seemed, in peaceful contemplation of a past that redounded wholly to his credit.

"Possible," he continued, after a pause, "possible as I didn't take the right view of things. They couldn't be worse, could they? and for that very reason they were bound to mend. As I came up street, feeling more like a hunted devil than a respectable citizen of the Old World and the New, I struck luck and made a fresh acquaintance. A Southerner, this was, very free with his dollars, and flush enough, for the matter of that, though where they came from is more than I can tell. A soft-spoken chap he was, with a handsome face, and might have been own brother to what's-his-name—the foreigner who was sweet upon you at Corfu, and got drowned afterwards that night in the white squall. This one would play for his shirt at poker, rondo, or euchre. Guess I cleaned him out in three days, and a very decent pile he had to begin upon. But I was kinder sorry for him too, Mrs. Delancy, he reminded me so much of your fancy man."

"Brute!" she muttered between her clenched teeth, while her heart thrilled with a vague sense of self-reproach, not altogether painful, to think even Victor had been forgotten in the quiet happiness that had come to her at last, that must only be remembered henceforth as a dream of fairyland.

"But it's getting late," observed Mr. Delancy, cutting short the thread of his narrative, and shading his eyes to note the declining sun. "I must be at Middleton to-night, and shall have to foot it all the way, worse luck! 'When we're rich we ride in chaises,' you know. Hang it! What's the use of

grumbling? I say, Laura, don't you remember the *yückers* we drove at Bucharest? I've never seen their equals before nor since. I wish I'd one of them to-night, if he was only hitched to a butcher's cart. Walking isn't my game, and never was."

"Do you stay long at Middleton?" she asked, while she could almost hear her heart beat.

"Depends on circumstances, Mrs. D.," was his reply. "Perhaps I ought to say, depends on *you.* I'm about cleaned out, you see, and when a fellow is cleaned out, it stands to reason he must stay in the same place. I'm just like a river steamer; always was. I consume a deal of fuel, but I've only got to take in wood, and there I am, ready to paddle on again, up stream or down. Laura," added the man in a husky voice, through which struggled a something of wounded affection, or vanity, or self-love, "I didn't expect you'd be *glad* to see me, but I've thought about you many a time since we parted. Oftener than you'd suppose. And you—hang it!—you don't seem ever so much as to have asked if I was dead or alive."

"Her reply came in low, distinct syllables. "I believed,"—she had almost said "I hoped,"—"I believed you were dead!"

"And didn't care a cent," he continued bitterly, "whether I was or not, so long as you never saw me again? Well, I've lived to disappoint you, and here I am! I've changed my name half a dozen times, and I won't say I call myself Ferdinand Delancy, Esq., either here or in London, but I can prove my identity fast enough, if I choose, and I will too, if I'm driven to it."

"But the steamer that had been boarded by pirates, and afterwards came ashore?" she asked, more with the view of gaining time for reflection,

than from any interest in his fate, seeing he was still alive. "How did you escape, when crew and passengers were massacred without remorse?"

"Never sailed in her at all," was his answer. "You see, there were a few of us who kept the ball rolling to some purpose, and lived more than free down there. The Spanish Government was to pay the bill, if anybody ever got paid; but it was no use to think of to-morrow in a place where a man couldn't take his boots off when he turned in, or go to sleep without a revolver in his hand. Fine times we had, I can tell you. Monté, for they liked nothing better, from sun-up to sun-down, and round again, with dancing, drinking, and all kinds of devil's delight going on between the deals. You may believe Derringers were popping like crackers in the old country at Christmas, and a day seldom passed but some good fellow was rubbed out. What's the odds? Another soon took his place. I've seen as many as five difficulties in one afternoon, between Farebrother's grocery and the Magnolia Saloon. Well, a friend of mine, a partner he was, met with an accident the very night before the steamer sailed. It began with a trifling difference of opinion, a little question of arithmetic—about a five-spot card and a four. It ended with two shots and a bowie-knife, so that the other man went under. My friend seems to have miscounted, and somehow the gentleman got nasty, and talked about a court of inquiry conducted by Judge Lynch, which could have been satisfactory to nobody. So I lent my friend a few dollars, an empty portfolio, and the use of my name. We got him on board at midnight, and the *Independiente* was hull-down before sunrise. Poor fellow! I suppose his cards were called, and he was bound to play his hand out. That's how he

had to settle up, instead of me, when the pirates took her—though why they didn't make a good job of it, and scuttle the old craft, beat's me altogether —and that's how I come to be alive and well as Frederic Dalton, back once more in my native country, and I might say without bounce, in the bosom of my family. Still, at all games there must be a 'zero' or an 'après.' I find myself without so much in my pocket as will pay my hotel bill at Middleton for the next two days, exclusive of sundries, attendance, champagne, and cigars."

She heard, but scarcely heeded what he said, so intent was she on her own project. She experienced, too, that most painful of misgivings, the fear lest her strength should fail, and she should break down before she could accomplish her purpose. He mistook her preoccupation for a weakness of which she was ashamed — for some lingering feeling of regard, which made her glad to see him again. Whatever may have passed between them, a man is seldom so bad but that his heart can be touched by the interest of a beautiful woman, and even Delancy's voice faltered while he asked—

"Do you hate me, Laura? I know I deserve nothing else, but I have often wished things had been different, particularly of late. I am getting on in years now. I want repose. I should like to be respectable. I should like to have a home of my own. And—and—it seems hard lines on a fellow to return with empty pockets and find his wife married again, hating him like poison and wishing he was dead!"

"It is no question of such things now," she replied in a hard, dry voice. "You did not come here to ask my forgiveness, which would be useless, or to propose that we should live together again,

which is impossible. You came as a mere matter of business, and as a mere matter of business I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"D——n it! you *are* a cool hand!" he answered angrily, yet not without admiration. "You've hit it, Mrs. D. I don't want you, but I want money. You've got money, and I've got a right to my share."

"As a question of money, then," said she, "the matter resolves itself into this: you are in possession of a secret, which, like all other secrets, loses its value the moment it is disclosed. If I refuse to assist you, what can you do?"

"Go to Mr. Lexley at once," he replied with a sneer. "You see I know all about him. Go to the parson, threaten him with exposure, and tell him the whole truth. Come! that takes you, Mrs. D. Confess now, you're played out."

"And what do you suppose my—Mr. Lexley would pay to keep a matter secret that was known to three people, of whom the one most concerned, namely myself, would certainly make the whole thing public at once? Do you suppose an honourable, upright man, a clergyman of the Church of England, would lend himself for a day to such a vile, wicked, and impossible concealment as you suggest? No; you have only me to work on, and it is fortunate for you that I am less hard-hearted than I used to be, and that I am willing to make some sacrifices, as far as my means will allow, in order to pass the rest of my life in peace and quiet, away from *you*."

"And with *him*! I understand. You love this parson of yours just as you hate me."

Noticing neither the taunt nor the bitter laugh with which it was launched, she continued in the same dry, unimpassioned voice—

"To return to you is utterly out of the question. Even if you wished it, which I can hardly believe, and tried to compel my obedience, I tell you fairly, I would appeal to the nearest magistrate. I do not think Mr. Delancy, under any of his names, would care to make the acquaintance of a Justice of the Peace."

"*Euchred!*" he muttered between his teeth; adding, in a louder voice and with an affected air of frankness, "We neither of us want to be blown upon, Laura; I expect that's the way to say it. Only you've got something to lose, and I haven't. My stake is easy enough to cover, you see, but you must go a few dollars better. Now I should say you ought to pull out fifty pounds—tens or fivers would suit me well enough—and cry quits. I wouldn't come near you then for three or four months."

"I have but twenty pounds in the world," she answered. "If I go home and fetch it, will you swear to leave this neighbourhood at once, and persecute me no more?"

"Twenty pounds is very little money," said he. "It will take five to pay my bill at Middleton. Still, if you are not flush just now, Laura, I must be liberal with you. I'll make it last as long as I can, my dear, only when it's done I shall have to ask for some more."

"Listen," she said, in her coldest, hardest tones, while her dreamy eyes seemed to gaze down some endless vista of the future, far beyond him, and in which he had no concern. "You *know* that what I say I mean, for good or for evil; that I never go back from my word, and threaten only what I am able to perform. You know, too, that if driven beyond a certain point, I have twice your courage,

while my recklessness is equal to your own. Now, attend! If you will be at the gate of my—my home in an hour from now, you shall have the money, on these conditions: that you cease to prowl about the house and grounds while you remain at Middleton, and that you absent yourself entirely from this neighbourhood, within two days, never to return. I shall let you hear from me, so that if you are actually in want you can apply by letter, addressed to a post-office in London, from which I will take care to have it forwarded. But remember! if my —if you should ever annoy Mr. Lexley by a communication of any kind, or should offer the slightest suggestion that such a person exists as yourself, that moment I make the whole business public, without delay or reservation, and you will never be able to extort one shilling from any of us again."

"You've not played your hand badly," he answered; "but you wouldn't have won so easy if I hadn't been precious hard up. Well, it must be a bargain, I suppose. What! you won't shake hands on it? Never mind. I can make myself up to look like a bishop, if I choose; I was always good at disguises, and — who knows? — some of these days I might put my legs under the same mahogany as you and your parson. Stranger things often happen in London. Jerusalem! that would be a spree! Perhaps he might introduce me to you: 'Mr. Dalton—Mrs. Lexley.' 'Glad to make your acquaintance, ma'am; have often heard of your excellent husband and yourself.' Why, it would be worth a thousand dollars! Cheer up, Laura; I'm only joking. Go and get the stuff, there's a good lass! I'll hang about the gate till you bring it me, and then—honour bright—I'll up stick and move

farther down. What? I didn't ask you to kiss me; but after so long a parting you might give us a shake of your hand."

Whether she did or not she never knew. She never knew how she got home, scared, blinded, stupefied, walking like a woman in a dream. She found herself starting up from a couch in her own pretty drawing-room, with a wild, maddening fear that her husband might come home, and it would be too late. Once she almost hoped she heard his step, and resolved to tell him all, only imploring that she should not be wholly parted from him—never to see his face, never to hear his voice again!

But this was a weakness no sooner indulged than she felt ashamed of it. With an effort, like that which enables the suicide to make away with himself, she rushed upstairs, dipped her numbed forehead in cold water, opened the dressing-case in which she kept her little store of pocket-money, counted out twenty pounds, selected the few jewels of value she possessed, and put together a small packet of necessaries, such as she could take with her conveniently in the basket-carriage.

Her mind was made up, but she so mistrusted her own resolution that she hurried these preparations fiercely, lest she should have time to reflect. With Peter's trotting abilities she could reach the station in twenty minutes. There was a train for London at 7.50. Once on the railway she would be fairly out of reach, and it was impossible, or, at least, most improbable, that Lexley could return before she started.

The success of her project depended solely on herself, and this consideration, more than any other, gave her strength to carry it out. There would be all the rest of her life left for weeping; but she

swallowed her tears now, lest, giving way in the slightest, the flood should burst its embankments and disable her for the task. Yet she pitied herself too, while she reflected, not without a sad and tender pride, on the sacrifice she was making for him—the husband who was *not* her husband; the man whom she loved so dearly now that she must never look in his face again.

The moment she recovered from the first shock of meeting Delancy it was plain what she must do. To such a nature as Lexley's, disgrace, and above all self-reproach, would be far more terrible than death. To discover that for months he had been living in open sin with another man's wife might drive him to insanity, and even suicide. He must never know the truth—must live on, bereaved, indeed, and sorrowful, but unstained by shame. She would sacrifice herself! She would burden his memory only as an object of hatred, scorn, and disgust, or worse still, drop out of his existence as if she had never belonged to it, like some fantastic dream that fades with light of day. The first thing to be thought of was escape. Let him believe her false, infamous, vilest of the vile. Perhaps the worse he thought of her the easier it would be for him to bear his affliction, the sooner he might teach his heart to forget. Delancy (she could not bring herself to think of him as her husband) might easily be silenced with a bribe. She would thus gain time. She wanted but a few hours, and her own resolution could accomplish the rest. Concealed in London, under an assumed name, she would be lost to both these men, and while Delancy would return to his old courses and play upon society for a livelihood, Lexley would go about his parish, sorrowful, heart-broken, but at least ignorant of the sad and shameful

truth. She had no fear of any explanation between them; the sharper had seemed so fully impressed with the case as she put it to him,—that his secret was only of value while undisclosed and used against herself; like a bubble it would burst and vanish the moment it was touched.

She sat down to write a few lines that might account for her sudden departure, but her hand shook so she was obliged to desist. She had never written to Lexley since their marriage. Who shall measure the anguish with which she looked on the sheet on which was scored an illegible scrawl, meant for "Dearest Algy," and laid the fragments in her bosom, against her heart?

But she walked downstairs, rang the bell and ordered Peter to be brought round with the basket-carriage, in a state of outward composure too perfect not to be assumed. Young Perigord, coming in to dress for dinner, thought he had never seen her looking so beautiful nor so pale.

"Can I do anything for you in London?" said she, giving him her hand. "I am going up by the seven-fifty, and must start at once, or I shall lose my train."

"Nothing the matter?" he asked anxiously.

"A great deal the matter," she answered with a wan smile; "I am suffering horribly. And there is only one man who can do anything for acute neuralgia. Tell Mr. Lexley, with—with my love, that if I am not back to dinner to-morrow I shall write. Take good care of him when I am gone. Good-bye."

"You should try port wine," said the young gentleman; but even while he spoke she had vanished to get ready for the journey.

She saw the housemaid; she visited the laundry;

she gave directions to all the servants; and not one of them observed anything remarkable in her appearance, except that "missis" looked paler than usual —an alteration they attributed to the heat. Even the cook, on whom she impressed some final instructions regarding dinner, could not but admire her knowledge of the details by which a man is made comfortable in his own home.

Lastly, hearing Peter snorting at the front door, she stole into her husband's dressing-room, where she looked over and smoothed the white bands in which he would preach the following Sunday.

If he found them more limp than usual, he never asked the reason, nor knew that tears had rained upon them, bitterer than the fountains of Marah, from the eyes he had worshipped too fondly, that were already dim with longing to look into his own, if only once again.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. DALTON

WITH money in his pocket, the spoils of his own predatory skill, Mr. Dalton, as he now chose to be called, was conscious of a genial flow of spirits that rendered him equal to any social occasion, requiring experience, audacity, or finesse. "Capital," he said to himself, affectionately smoothing out the creases of a five-pound note as he spread it on the table,—"capital is all I require to be one of the most successful men of the day. Capital has induced me to embark on all my noblest enterprises, but *a little more* capital has always been wanting to enable me to hold on and sweep the board in a fresh deal. Waiter, devilled kidneys, another egg, and a small glass of brandy."

Mr. Dalton was breakfasting in the best sitting-room of the Royal Hotel, Middleton. Any doubts entertained by its excellent landlady of her guest's solvency had been set at rest by the production of a roll of notes, which he had counted with much ostentation, while consuming sherry and bitters in the bar; causing her to endorse the opinion of John, the superannuated waiter, who pronounced Mr. Dalton "haffable, and quite the gentleman."

Such visitors are always well treated at a house of entertainment. They know what to order, when it should be served, and how much they ought to

pay for it. Mr. Dalton's breakfast seemed ample and luxurious, nor was he the man to lose any particle of present enjoyment because the future was uncertain; and on the past it was better not to dwell. He finished his devilled kidneys to the last mouthful, he smacked his lips over the hot coffee, he tossed the small glass of brandy down his throat at one gulp, as if he was used to it and it agreed with him. Throwing himself back in his chair he then lit one of the Royal's choicest cigars at sixpence—a fabrication of dried cabbage-leaves and opium, and proceeded to arrange his plans for the day.

The result of these cogitations caused him to decide on immediate action, and the bell was rung for John forthwith.

"Waiter, bring me an Army List."

"Army List, sir? yes, sir," said John, and vanished; well knowing there was nothing of the kind in the house.

"Boots," however, was sent to borrow an old one from the circulating library, and Mr. Dalton, calling for pens, ink, and paper, studied it with much assiduity. Then he wrote three letters in different hands, with different signatures, addressed, "Francis Dalton, Esq., etc. etc. etc.," and marked "On Her Majesty's Service." These he frayed and fingered at the edges, giving them the appearance of having been carried about in a coat-pocket, and also smudged the envelopes with a little dirt—a substance it was not difficult to find in any part of the hotel sitting-room. These preparations completed, the bell was rung for John once more.

"Waiter," said the guest interrogatively, "there are some cavalry in the barracks?"

"Yes, sir," answered John, thinking it was high

time the windows were cleaned, and wondering if he would have to clean them.

"What regiment, do you know?"

John had "heard the number, but could not call it to mind—dragoons," he believed. "The officers were exceeding haffable, and, as far as he could see, hacted quite the gentleman!"

"Do they ever come down here?"

"Not often; they kep' theirselves to theirselves. There was a hexcellent billiard-table, too, and a"—skittle-ground, John would have added, but stopped, remembering that this delightful pastime was little in vogue with the higher classes.

"Can you tell me any of their names?" continued Mr. Dalton, arranging his collar in the glass over the chimney-piece.

"Yes," John could do that. "They was a Captain Nokes an' a Captain Stokes." He bore these in mind in consequence of their similarity. "He see one of 'em, he couldn't tell which, go by the house this morning, just after you rang your bell, sir, for breakfast."

The waiter then proceeded to take away plates, cups and saucers, with as much clatter as possible; and rebuffed in his attempt to elicit any directions as to luncheon or dinner, retired in good order, despondent, yet not entirely yielding to defeat.

From John it was hopeless to expect more information; but, lounging up the main street of the town, Mr. Dalton passed a confectioner's shop, containing a gaudy young lady behind a counter, and took advantage of his opportunity. The gaudy young lady served him a glass of cherry-brandy, with a smirk that denoted no disinclination for a little gossip, and a happy compliment conveying certain delicate allusions to her eyes, colour, and personal

charms, placed the pair on a footing of confidential intercourse at once.

From this competent authority Mr. Dalton learned that Middleton was graced by the presence of what she was pleased to call "the millingtary"; that a whole regiment, with its band, unhappily could not find room in the barracks, the only thing wanting to constitute perfect bliss; that she believed "as there was only two captins, at the present speakin', and she couldn't say whether there was any other officers or not; but didn't the gentleman (who, perhaps, belonged to the millingtary himself), didn't he think a 'orse-soldier, particularly when he was riding his 'orse, one of the most beautiful sights on earth?"

"Next to a pretty woman," said Dalton, with such a bow as completed the conquest it had cost him two glasses of vile cherry-brandy to make.

The gaudy young lady gave a little sigh when he lounged out of the shop, but was presently comforted on reflecting that if he remained at Middleton he was sure to look in again.

Over the barracks, to which Mr. Dalton now took his way, reigned an utter stagnation of life and movement. Detachments, like regiments, become torpid at two periods of the day; namely, ten minutes after the men's dinners and ten minutes before afternoon parade. Even the sentry at the gate, a gigantic dragoon, redolent at ten paces of stables, tobacco, and pipeclay, seemed in danger of committing that heinous military offence, slumber on his post, and stared vacantly at the dry and dusty parade-ground, more like an automaton than a living man, who could rein a trooper, use a sword, and drink a gallon of beer at a sitting without its having the slightest effect. He yawned indeed once, and

brought his spurs together with a clank, but these were the only tokens he betrayed of being alive.

In the officers' mess-room, a bare apartment tenanted by countless flies, sat our friends Nokes and Stokes, brought to the lowest stage of depression and vacuity, as men to whom life had nothing now to offer but resignation to their lot.

"And we can't have luncheon for an hour at least," said the latter officer, stretching his limbs to their longest, and considering whether he should smoke another cigar. "Such is destiny. I've done duty at Meerut, at Newbridge, at Portobello Barracks, and once for two weary months on the west coast of Ireland; but of all forsaken places that can hold a dragoon, I never saw the equal of Middleton at this season of the year."

The other, who was smoking, nodded assent.

"I can't read for more than two hours a day," continued Stokes, lashing himself into energy, while he recapitulated his grievances; "I can't learn the fiddle, for I haven't patience; nor the flute, for I haven't wind. I can't play chess, right hand against left, nor cut with you for sixpences, nor drink Badminton, nor even smoke—all day long. I wonder what fellows did in the Bastile? One hears of them kept there for years; I daresay it wasn't so dull as this place. Why can't we be quartered here in the hunting season? That's the War Office, I suppose. Another of their precious civilian mulls! That reminds me. Why shouldn't we go and call on the Dennisons, at Plumpton Priors?"

"Not at home," answered his friend. "Gone to London. Saw Mrs. D. in Pall Mall the day before yesterday."

"Done again!" replied Stokes. "Then there's nothing for it but to take a walk—I hate taking a

walk!—or to lie down and sleep till dinner-time. It's as bad as going round the Cape in a transport!"

"Worse," observed Nokes. But even while he spoke there came relief in sight.

Mr. Dalton, who had so arranged his limited wardrobe as to present that semi-sporting appearance which is attainable by means of scanty trousers, a very stiff collar, and a forward set of the hat, was now crossing the parade-ground, with an obvious design of taking the officers' quarters by storm. Stokes, being first to notice him, leaped from his chair as though vitality were restored by the very sight of a visitor, and watched his approach from the mess-room window, with a running commentary on the dress, manners, and general appearance of this welcome arrival.

"Parson? No; too good a hat. Sawbones? Don't think it; would be in a greater hurry. Manager of county bank? Too little stomach. Manager of provincial theatre? Too much collar. The race lies between three: swell photographer, surveyor from the Board of Works, or man with a horse to sell. Lay you six to five you don't name the winner."

"Lay you five to four it's none of them," answered Nokes; "but we'll have him in and liquor him up, whoever he is."

By this time Mr. Dalton had reached the door, and was feigning to look for a bell that did not exist. A ubiquitous mess-waiter, in a clean linen jacket, extricated him from this difficulty, and presently appeared with the visitor's card on a salver.

Stokes handed it to Nokes. "Never saw the name before," said he. "Don't know him from Adam; do *you*?"

Nokes was a man of reflection. "Might be a

chap from the village," he suggested, "with a writ for Fluffy."

"Fluffy," his junior subaltern, a handsome young fellow, given to spending too much money, was playing cricket eleven miles off at that moment.

"Nonsense!" replied Stokes. "Fluffy told me yesterday old Fluff has parted freely and squared everything."

"Then show the gentleman in," said Nokes, and while he spoke Mr. Dalton made his bow in the doorway.

Such a life as Delancy's, exacting habits of constant observation and unremitting self-restraint, makes a man at home in any society except that of the real English lady, whose instinct, rather than her perception, enables her to detect the baser metal beneath the spurious glitter by which it is overlaid. Having lived with all classes in his chequered career, from Russian princes and Wallachian boyards to Mexican cattle-drivers and red-shirted miners wielding pickaxe and crowbar in search of Californian gold, he had learned to humour the tastes and prejudices of his companions, so as to keep their intellects amused and their suspicions lulled, while he emptied their pockets for his own advantage at his own convenience.

One who boasted he was a match for a Yankee Jew of Scottish extraction, had little to fear in a contest of fraud or cunning from two free-handed, frank-hearted, outspoken officers of dragoons.

Mr. Dalton put into his greeting just so much deference as was compatible with a manly honesty of character, showing no little tact in the frank bearing that implied similarity of tastes and pursuits with his entertainers.

"I took the liberty," said he, "of sending in my

card, as it seemed hopeless to find any military man who could favour me with an introduction to the officers of the 100th Dragoons. Had it been in the hunting or shooting season I could have made your acquaintance, gentlemen, in a pleasanter manner. I have the honour of speaking, I think, to Captain Stokes and Captain Nokes."

Both officers bowed, and the latter amused himself in speculating how the visitor would find out which was which.

"Happening to pass through Middleton," continued Dalton, "I could not lose the opportunity of paying my respects to your distinguished regiment. There are not many attractions in this place, and I am fortunate to have found you at home."

Here Stokes interrupted him to offer sherry, which was accepted and produced at once.

"It is certainly dull enough," continued the visitor. "I have been knocking about at different times nearly all over the world, and I think I never saw people less inclined to open their eyes and keep moving. If it wasn't for your fellows, who are of the smartest, I verily believe the whole town would go fast asleep. It's hard on officers to be quartered here at this season, though a friend of mine told me he liked it immensely in the winter."

"That must have been little Straight of the Lancers," exclaimed Stokes. "He had the detachment two years ago, and has sworn by the place ever since."

Dalton feared no hazard at any game he played. "You know Straight?" said he. "What a good fellow he is, and what a nice weight? Rides well too, and seems uncommonly fond of hunting."

He had never heard of Straight in his life, but a bow drawn at a venture sent its arrow home.

"Capital fellow!" echoed Stokes, whose manner became friendly and familiar at once. "I wish there was a chance of his dropping in here to-day. Are you staying at the Royal?"

"I am indeed," answered Dalton, "for my sins. And very badly they do me."

"Of course you'll have luncheon with us?" urged the captain. "It will be ready in ten minutes. We can give you something fit to eat, and that's about all we *can* do for you in this beastly hole."

Dalton excused himself like a man who does not wish to be taken at his word, expressing fear of trespassing on his host's valuable time.

Stokes burst into a laugh. "If you only knew," said he, "how we are put to it to get through the day, that is the last reason you would offer. Why, Nokes there has smoked seven cigars since morning stables, only to keep himself awake."

"Five," said Nokes. "Here comes luncheon."

A plentiful meal in the middle of a hot summer's day, washed down with much sherry, and succeeded by full-flavoured tobacco, disposes a man to think favourably of his neighbour, and to be well satisfied with his lot.

Both Stokes and Nokes found their new companion very much to their taste, and regretted that the absent "Fluffy" should be debarred from such agreeable society. The visitor seemed to have been everywhere, to have done everything, and to know everybody. His acquaintance with military life, of which, though superficial, he made the most, excited their astonishment and interest.

"You've been in the service, haven't you?" said Stokes. "I thought you were no civilian the first moment I saw you walk across the barrack-yard."

"Not exactly," answered the other with the air

of a *vieille moustache.* "At least, never in our own, but I have seen a good deal of foreign troops, and was always a bit of a soldier at heart."

"Never took the shilling?" said Nokes. "I wish I hadn't. It's the worst game out. Have some more sherry."

The speaker, a good persistent grumbler of the true mess-room pattern, could no more have lived out of a barrack-yard than a fish can live out of water.

Dalton helped himself to sherry and lit another cigar. His entertainers could do no less, and all three began to think Middleton was not such a bad place as it seemed.

"The fact is," continued the visitor, after a liberal gulp of sherry, "I have a great deal of time on my hands during the summer months. They say an old coachman loves the crack of the whip, so I while it away with military literature—the history of our own and other armies. I have come lately on several anecdotes illustrating the extraordinary dash and gallantry of the 100th Dragoons in the Peninsula and elsewhere. I expect Boney liked them less than any regiment in your service. It struck me that the army really requires a short but compendious history of this gallant corps, and I have taken the matter in hand. Do me the favour, Captain Nokes, to run your eye over two or three letters I have received from officers promising me assistance. I think if I fail, it will not be for want of material."

Removing the cigar from his mouth, Nokes accepted the letters, and thus identified himself to the visitor.

He perused them calmly and judicially, returning them with the observation—

"Jones is the only one I know. He's not much of a fellow for book-learning."

"Unfortunately he did *not* write that letter himself," returned Dalton, reflecting that to know Jones might mean to know his hand. "He was extremely unwell when I saw him, and dictated his letter to a lady who seemed to be staying in the house."

"That was Jones all over," answered the other; and Dalton felt he had played a winning card.

"Now the weather is too warm for composition," he continued pleasantly, "and I did not come here to bother you two gentlemen with my literary labours; but if your adjutant or some of your old sergeants could furnish me with any regimental details I should be really grateful. Everything connected with such a corps as yours is interesting to the military public. I shall hope to bring my book out in a few months, and shall take the liberty of presenting your mess with half a dozen copies." The officers looked at each other.

"You'd like to go round stables?" said Stokes. "We can show you some useful horses, and a capital plan our colonel invented for the men's kits. Of course you'll dine with us afterwards. We shall be four at mess, and though it's not a lively party, at least we can give you better liquor than they have at the Royal."

"If it is half as good as the company I shall be tempted to drink too much," was the answer. "In the meantime I should like very much to see your horses and valises, and to hear a little more about this new system of drill."

So the three strolled round the barracks from canteen to kitchen, Dalton expressing approval, not too unqualified, of everything that was pointed out.

A few judicious remarks on high saddles and severe bits, founded on his Mexican experiences, denoted a kindred spirit; and as he had the tact to fire a double-barrelled compliment at men and horses by observing that he never saw such well-bred animals, able to carry such heavy weights, he got through the afternoon without exposing his utter ignorance of all the details that constitute efficiency in a dragoon.

He felt it a relief, however, when the hour of dinner approached, and breathed more freely as he made the necessary change of toilet in his hotel.

"Well out of that," said he, tying a clean white "starcher" with exceeding care. "It's all plain sailing now; but I must be a little careful with the wine; that sherry of theirs is so infernally strong."

"What do you suppose he is?" asked Stokes of Nokes, working diligently at his sleek head with a pair of hard hair-brushes.

"Not what you said," answered Nokes, from a front room, carrying on the conversation through two open doors and a passage.

"Well, he hasn't tried to sell us a horse yet," returned the other; "though there's no saying what he may do after dinner. He's not a civilian, and he's not a regular soldier either. Sometimes I fancied he might have been in the Confederate army, only he would have swaggered about it. The fellow's a gentleman, I think."

"Not so sure of that," was the reply. "I think he'd receive the allowance if you ran him among thorough-bred ones. I beg his pardon," added Nokes, turning from the window whence he observed the individual in question enter the barrack-yard. "He *is* a gentleman. I'm satisfied now."

"Why?" said Stokes.

"Because he's got evening clothes!"

There was no contesting so indisputable a qualification, and the little party sat down to dinner in perfect harmony and comfort. Fluffy and his brother subaltern did not turn up, the former having prolonged his innings and the latter missed his train.

Three people, even under the most favourable circumstances of wine, cookery, and conversation, cannot well spend more than a couple of hours over their meal. With "watch-setting" came the second bottle of claret, and when that had been consumed coffee was served with the inevitable cigar. Both Stokes and Nokes had done justice to their fare, while the visitor, though he drank less freely than the others, appeared the most elevated of the three. It was his proposal that they should adjourn to the hotel.

"I am an early fellow," said he, "though I don't mind sitting up now and then in such pleasant company. What say you to a smoke in the cool fresh air, a brandy-and-soda at the Royal, and, perhaps, a game of billiards? The waiter tells me they have a slate table, and it is not impossible that he speaks the truth."

Such a proposal was sure to be accepted. In ten minutes the three strolled into the billiard-room of the Royal, as the head clerk at the bank and the postmaster, who had finished a game of a hundred up for a bottle of sherry, strolled out.

Dalton, who already knew both these worthies by sight, made his entrance, holding one captain by the arm, and conversing familiarly with the other. The bank clerk never doubted, as he stated subsequently on oath, but that this was another army gentleman taking his pleasure in plain clothes.

Brandy-and-soda goes very well with billiards, but together they make people forgetful of time. Stokes matched himself against the visitor, while his brother officer looked on, and a couple of games, fifty up, were finished off before either gentleman felt he had settled to his play. Of these the captain won both with but little to spare, and became a couple of sovereigns richer by the transaction. He was in high spirits, for Stokes liked billiards, and everybody likes winning. The two sovereigns also were paid at once, when Nokes took the cue, beating Dalton, who never got a break, as both officers observed, "in a common trot."

"I'll play you for a fiver," said the loser, with some semblance of irritation, only kept down by courtesy. "You wouldn't have beat me so easy on any other table."

Nokes accepted, and lost by two. The other's play seemed very uncertain, and he attributed several palpable blunders to the wine he drank at the barracks.

"You've the best of me, I think," said he, thoughtfully chalking his cue. "Never mind; I'll play you double or quits."

So they played double or quits, and again Dalton won. Stokes now took up the running, and offered to back himself against the visitor for ten pounds.

"You will think me very slow," said the other, "but I had rather not play for quite so large a stake. A fiver, if you please; but don't you agree with me that is quite enough to win or lose amongst friends?"

So they played for a fiver, and again Dalton won, though only by the execution of a difficult stroke at the finish. It was now past one o'clock.

John's weary warning face had appeared more than once at the door, and with many expressions of goodwill the gentlemen parted for the night.

"I start early to-morrow," said the visitor, "and must wish you good-bye now, with hearty thanks for your hospitality and kindness. I never spent a pleasanter day in my life." Then they shook hands, and the two officers strolled home together.

"That's a broad hint about settling," observed Nokes. "I shall send my servant down with a cheque the first thing in the morning."

"So shall I," said Stokes, reflecting that money was scarce, and though he had left two sovereigns and a handful of silver on his dressing-table, so large a sum as five pounds would necessitate a draft on his agent.

"He's a deuced pleasant fellow," continued the former. "But there's something about him, too, that isn't quite the clean potato. What a beggar it is to talk!"

"Did you see the scar on his left hand?" asked Stokes. "It looked deep enough for a sabre cut. I wonder whether it is?"

"That's how they brand them in the galleys," answered his friend. "I've seen worse players at billiards," he added after a pause.

"He's a good style," said Stokes, "but I call him awfully loose and uncertain in his execution. We gave him a skinful. It's quite possible, old man, that he was a trifle screwed."

"Not he," replied the other. And I am inclined to think Nokes was right.

The Middleton Bank opened at 9 A.M., and while our two captains, assisted by Fluffy and his brother subaltern, were manœuvring the squadron with considerable pomp on the race-course, Mr.

Dalton presented their respective cheques. The clerk, who had seen the three billiard-players together the night before, cashed them without hesitation, wishing in his heart he could afford to wager as freely on his favourite game. Buttoning in his breast-pocket Bank of England notes to the amount of a hundred for the one and seventy-five pounds for the other, Mr. Dalton congratulated himself on having devoted some spare hours to the art of caligraphy as applied to the mutation of written characters and figures. He felt his studies had not been thrown away.

A train started for London at ten, and an omnibus left the hotel for the station at five minutes before the hour. Boots, who helped with the luggage, receiving a shilling from Mr. Dalton on his departure, expressed a hope, which was never realised, that they might soon see their visitor at the Royal again.

CHAPTER XV

DESOLATE

WE all know the vague sensation of dismay with which we wake in the morning after an event that has occasioned us grief, vexation, or inconvenience. The man within the man, who never goes to sleep, nor forgets himself, nor loses his head, nor fails to remind us what fools we are, has the clearest perception of that which took place yesterday; but as he can only admonish us through the medium of our faculties, until these are thoroughly aroused we escape with a dull sense of depression and misgiving, akin to nightmare, but wanting even so much of reality as there is in a dream.

The familiar objects in his bed-chamber looked strange to Lexley without her presence who had made the comfort no less than the romance of his everyday life. He rose early and went out into the morning air, striving to shake off a feeling of gloom and despondency that common sense told him was utterly unreasonable, and that must be dispelled immediately on the arrival of the post.

Breakfasting with his pupil, the conversation could not but turn on his wife's departure, and his anxiety was no doubt relieved by their joint speculations; but the lad observed his tutor's cheek grow pale when the postman passed the

window, and liked him, I think, all the better for the weakness.

Two letters were brought to the clergyman, neither of which was in Laura's handwriting, and he rose from his chair to conceal the spasm of pain that passed across his face at this disappointment.

"Of course there's no news of Mrs. Lexley, sir," said the youth's clear cheerful voice from the breakfast-table. "She didn't leave here till the country letters had gone out of London. I hope you'll have a good account by the second post, even if she don't come back herself. One misses a lady awfully at breakfast," added this young philosopher. "Men always put too much water in the teapot for a second cup."

"Of course!" exclaimed the tutor, brightening. "I never thought of that. What an idiot I was to forget about the London post! No doubt she will be back this afternoon, and you shall have your tea made to-morrow on the first principles of science. Now, let's go, and get our work done. Afterwards, I shall drive to the station, and meet the down express at four o'clock."

Lexley was a conscientious man, with a good deal of that hard-bitten English resolution to encounter pain, mental or physical, which we call pluck. He tried nobly to do his duty by the young gentleman whom he instructed, but found it even more difficult to fix his own attention than his pupil's, on the matter in hand. He worked doggedly on, however, by the clock, and felt, if possible, a keener sense of relief than did Perigord when luncheon-time came and studies were over for the day. It is needless to say that Peter was required to put his best foot foremost, or that the basket-carriage arrived at the station three-quarters of an hour too soon.

The down express was five minutes late. He thought it would never come. How his heart beat as it glided alongside the platform! How pale his cheek grew, and how sad he felt when it produced only the rector of an adjoining parish and Mr. Runt, the cattle-dealer, who never seemed to buy or sell cattle, but came and went from Smithfield regularly twice a week!

She could not be down to-day, that was clear; but, of course, there would be a letter by the second post. The second post arrived. So did the letter. He read it amongst the roses, and this is what it said:—

"Think of me as badly as you can. It will take months, I know; but pray night and morning only to forget me. I am never coming back. You will never see me nor hear of me again. Search will be utterly useless. I have chosen my own part and mean to abide by it. You must never mention the name of her who has only brought you shame and sorrow, but who loves you still. You must learn to hate her. Hate her — despise her — forget her. Only, some day, when time has brought consolation, and you are happy with another, remember, that she who now writes this with a steady hand, would have given more than life for your sake, and that the other one cannot love you so fondly as Laura."

A man shot through the heart, falls on his face, not on his back, and in the same way there is an instinct in strong natures that resists the more bravely, the more intolerable the pain, the more overwhelming the blow. Lexley folded his letter with fingers that trembled not, and smiled a grim smile without a quiver of the lip, while he plucked one of the roses from her favourite tree, and pulled

it to pieces, leaf by leaf, repeating unconsciously the touching prayer of King Lear—

"Oh! let me not be mad—not mad, sweet heaven!"

Then he retired to his study, and wrote to the father of his pupil. That pupil coming down to dinner was scared by his tutor's appearance as they met in the hall. Lexley's face looked white and drawn; there was a dull stare in his eye, like that of a suffering dumb animal, and he seemed ten years older since morning.

"Something very painful has taken place," said he. "It has decided me to ask your father's permission for you to return home to-morrow. You can drive the pony-carriage to the station. God bless you, my boy; you have been a pleasant companion, a true gentleman, and, I believe, a sincere friend. We shall not meet again, but I shall always think kindly of you. What has happened leaves me no alternative but solitude; at all events, for a considerable time, or I would not feel compelled to say good-bye."

"Can I do anything, sir?" asked the lad, with tears in his eyes.

"Nothing," answered Lexley; and they sat down to dinner in silence.

When their meal was over, the clergyman retired to his study, and Perigord, somewhat dismayed, heard him lock himself in.

"Here's a go!" reflected this young gentleman; whose thoughts, like his conversation, were more or less couched in his own vernacular. "Mrs. L. bolted, no doubt! and with that chap who was always hanging about and peeping into the garden over the hedge. Well, there is no accounting for women! I thought she was the right sort, if ever

there was one. And such an ugly beggar, too. No more to be compared to Lexley than a sandman's donkey to the winner of the Derby. And now, what's to become of *me*? The governor will be awfully put out. He won't like my being at home by myself, and he hates having me in London. There's nothing else for it, though. I shall be swelling it in the Park the day after to-morrow. Jemima will lend me her mare, I daresay. Shouldn't wonder if I was to have a ride with Annie Dennison. Won't that be jolly? But I'm sorry for Lexley, too. He's a thundering good one. I shall hate the next fellow who coaches me, I know."

Then he smoked his short pipe, with his head out of window, and turned complacently into bed, meditating on the Park, the theatre, Jemima's bay mare, and the public-school matches, at Lord's.

Under the same roof, separated from him only by half a dozen steps and a partition-wall, there was a struggle going on, as for life and death, no less fierce and protracted than his who wrestled of old at Penuel, through the livelong night "even to the breaking of the day."

Lexley neither slept nor rested, but passed his hours of agony pacing to and fro in his chamber, or flinging himself down on his knees in prayer. Only thus, and in a strength that was not his own, could he pass through the ordeal; but he *did* pass through it, and when the summer sun arose it shone upon a man heart-broken but resigned. The lesson his duty bade him teach others, had not been lost on himself, and he tried to drink the bitter draught calmly, as knowing by whose hand it was pressed to his lips.

When the housemaid went to make his bed, it was smooth as she had left it the day before.

"He haven't slept much, haven't master," said the woman, shaking up the pillows. "Dear, dear, I'm afraid now as his trouble's a'most too much for him to bear!"

And so it would have been had he tried to carry it without assistance. Had he not lain down his burden at the feet of One who never fails to stoop and succour such as plead for aid, grovelling helplessly in the dust.

On Lexley's thoughts and speculations, as they succeeded each other through the watches of that dreary night, it would be painful to dwell. With all the blindness of one who loves, with all the self-deception to which the human heart is prone, it seemed impossible, in the face of his wife's letter, to put any construction on her flight but one. It was obvious that she had left him of her own free-will, and not alone. While the fond expressions of attachment in which she bade him never forget her, did but dip in venom a shaft that her hand, and hers only, could have buried in his heart. Many a time during the struggle his natural impulses rose in their strength, not to be denied, and he longed to have his hand on the villain's throat who had covered him with this dark shame, inflicted on him this great injury; but ever with the human longing for vengeance came the memory of a divine face, crowned with its diadem of suffering, that smiled forgiveness on those who inflicted His torture, even in the agony of a cruel and shameful death. Then he would fall once more on his knees and pray.

But he never shed a tear. No, not even when morning broke, and he felt his petitions had been so answered, that he was able to think calmly of the woman who injured him, and to hope that she might never undergo anything like the misery of which

she had been the cause. His eyeballs were dry and seared, while an iron band seemed to gird his forehead, tighter and less endurable every moment, as day wore on; for the lapse of time brought no respite, no cessation, and to this vigorous nature was denied the solace of weaker sufferers, who find refuge in unconsciousness or seek relief in tears.

His pupil had started to meet an early train. When the clergyman came down to his empty breakfast-room he realised what it was to be alone.

The family worship with which it was his custom to begin the day assembled the servants as usual. With a steady voice the master of the modest household offered up his prayers for the future, his thanksgivings for the past. The domestics, who instinctively recognised the presence of some great and discreditable calamity, suspecting, to use their own words, that there was "something up along o' missis!" wondered at his self-command, ascribing it, not to true courage, but to hardness of heart. He would have received more pity had he taken his punishment with less fortitude.

A moment's leisure in such a condition meant simply a moment's additional pain. He dared not as yet confront his misery, nor consider in what manner it would be well to bear himself in this crushing humiliation. He must take refuge for the present in work, and try to be thankful that his duty called upon him daily, and almost hourly, for exertion.

In the course of weeks, months, perhaps years, he thought, though the burden could never be lightened, he would have learned to bear it better, and an end *must* come at last, bringing with it calm and oblivion in the grave.

Like all men who devote themselves to a

particular calling—and his, as the most sacred, could not but be also the most engrossing—he had been accustomed to postpone every other consideration to the requirements of his profession. His first duty was to his parish, and even now, in the wreck of all earthly honour and happiness, the ruin of name and fame and hearth and home, he turned from sheer habit to the necessities of his cure as a colonel attends the parade of his regiment, or the captain of a line-of-battle ship appears on his own quarter-deck at twelve o'clock. It was his one chance of dulling, if ever so little, the pain that ate away his heart.

From cottage to cottage, from homestead to homestead, he visited those who were in sickness, need, sorrow, or affliction. Here pleading with a drunkard, there comforting a cripple, encouraging the honest to persevere, and for the black sheep of his flock finding counsel rather than reproof. Ill news flies fast, even in a country parish, and it was gall and wormwood to him that not one of his humble friends inquired, as usual, after "his good lady." But when, in the porch of an outlying cottage, inhabited by a rat-catcher of poaching notoriety, the deaf wife enlarged on Mrs. Lexley's many good qualities—her charity, her courtesy, her condescension, and her beauty—the cup overflowed. He had taken up his hat and was half a mile off before Mrs. Sheepshanks, diligently smoothing her apron, could extricate herself from the metaphor in which she got involved while comparing the parson's handsome helpmate to hollyhocks in a garden and a queen on her throne.

He had visited this remote and humble dwelling to-day because it was out of the direct road to Oakley, where Jim Loder lay dead, and whither he

was bound. Had he gone there from his own house by the shortest way, he must have passed the stile at which he had last seen his wife. All his courage, all his fortitude, were as yet unequal to encounter such a trial.

An hour spent in prayer with the bereaved mother. A long and somewhat stern argument with the old keeper, who could not be brought to accept his affliction, and persistently refused to acknowledge that "whatever is is right," bringing forward many sound and pertinent reasons in support of his own views, that "most as is seems a muddle." One look at the draped motionless form, lying solemnly in the darkened bedroom, took him for a time out of himself. Starting to walk home, he seemed to realise how empty and unsubstantial a matter is life—how fleeting, uncertain, and unreal. Eight-and-forty hours ago it had been so precious, that he hardly dared confront the possibility of its termination, and now, death would be more than welcome, if only as a relief from the bodily suffering that oppressed him—the feeling as if his brow was compressed in a band of red-hot iron, that scorched and seared his brain.

It was a glorious summer's afternoon, rich in warmth, beauty, and fragrance; the wheat, high in blade, rippled to a darker green under the gentle breeze; the meadows, as yet uncut, were deep in herbage, a lark sang merrily aloft, and a thrush carolled sweetly below. The landscape glowed in beauty, the air seemed loaded with fragrance. It was just such a summer's afternoon as that other—forty-eight hours ago—only forty-eight hours ago!

A change was coming over him, a physical change, of which he could not but feel conscious. He had watched, fasted, and laboured hard; now,

in the weakness caused by exhaustion, he experienced a dull torpid sensation that was positive relief. He would no longer avoid the spot he had feared to approach in the morning: he would sit and rest on the very stile at which he had last seen her. How long ago. Years was it? or days? He had lost count. What matter? What mattered anything now? Did men feel like this before death? or was his brain failing him? Again King Lear's petition, "not mad, sweet heaven," rose to his lips.

He did not know how long he had been leaning against the stile, when some children came wearily down the lane; their little feet scraped up the dust, their little voices prattled softly as they approached. It seemed as if the little people themselves were tired, or sorrowful, or both. Lexley loved children; most men do who are good for anything. It roused and took him out of himself, to observe these small wayfarers, whose progress was necessarily slow; for a child's eyes and ears are alive to all the influences of nature, and it is never in too great a hurry to stop and thoroughly examine anything that excites its curiosity.

The leader of this group was a young person six years of age, at most, with round blue eyes and a resolute little face, combining a certain shrewdness and power of observation with the simplicity natural to childhood. She marshalled and seemed to command the party, whose march, however, was considerably impeded by a little straggler, lately learning to walk, that lost its foothold and subsided into a sitting posture once at least in every twenty yards. But for this pigmy, the guardian who supported its faltering steps would surely have seemed the smallest creature ever seen out of a cradle.

When the procession drew near, Lexley recognised its leader as one of his Sunday scholars, by no means the least promising of her class. The child blushed red while she met his eye, and made him as demure and majestic a little curtsey as was compatible with a weighty bundle she carried in her hand.

"Why, Patty," said the pastor, "what are you doing so far from home, and how did you ever get here with so heavy a load as that?"

The soft brow clouded, and the rosy mouth quivered as if a burst of tears were not far off, but Patty kept them bravely down, and murmured her answer in an audible whisper that caused the eyes of her followers to open wide with admiration.

"Please, sir, it's Polly, and — and, please, sir, mother bade me take her down to Farmer Veal."

"Who is Polly?" asked the clergyman; and the little maid, melting at last into tears, poured out the history of her sorrows without restraint.

It seemed that Polly — a cross-grained parrot with a highly-developed talent for bad language— had excited the admiration of Farmer Veal's wife, who, coveting the possession of this treasure, had hinted more than once she would like to become its purchaser. Patty's father was a labouring man, earning low wages, with many mouths to feed. Times were hard, and the sum of ten shillings was not to be despised, so Patty had been commissioned to effect the sale, though her own poor little heart seemed ready to break for the loss of her favourite. This piteous tale was narrated in the simplest language, varied by an occasional sob, the bystanders, none of whom stood three feet high, listening with exceeding gravity, but making no comment.

"May I peep?" said the parson, and, permission being accorded, Polly, looking sour and sulky, was

disclosed to view. Lexley felt in his waistcoat pocket, and fingered a half-sovereign.

"Did your mother promise the bird to Mrs. Veal?" said he, "or may you sell it to anybody else?"

"No; mother hadn't promised it to nobody. But Mrs. Veal would likely buy the bird, because as it was so beautiful"— and again the blue eyes filled with tears.

"I'll buy your bird," continued the parson; "there's half a sovereign for it."

The little audience gathered round, opening their eyes wider than before.

"Thank you, sir," answered Patty, sorrowfully enough, and put the cage in his hand.

"Now, Patty," said the parson, "you are a good little girl, and I am going to make you a present. Tell mother Mr. Lexley bought Polly, and gave it to you for your own—you understand? your very own—to keep, and do what you like with."

The child flung herself on her knees, wrapped her arms round the cage, and, rocking it to and fro, exclaimed, "Oh, Polly! Polly! I do believe I shall never say good-bye to you as long as I live!"

Then she took her departure, with a shy upward look at her benefactor, that was worth a whole vocabulary of thanks, marching off in triumph surrounded by her suite, and lugging her treasure in a close embrace.

Lexley waited till they were out of sight, then passed into the meadow, threw himself on the ground, burying his face in the long grass, and burst into a passion of weeping—unaccountable, not to be kept back, and of which he felt cruelly ashamed. But when he rose to his feet, the iron band seemed to have been loosened about his forehead, and he knew that he was in his right mind.

CHAPTER XVI

PLAY

"YES, I'm very glad to see you, even amongst these awfully smart people, and you must tell me all about dear Middleton. General, let me introduce Mr. Perigord. Mr. Perigord, this is *my* General—General Pike!"

Annie Dennison, wearing the best-fitting and bluest of habits, and the neatest of hats, stopped her horse in its canter down the Ride, to shake hands with Lexley's late pupil, a compliment that young gentleman accepted with many professions of gratitude for her condescension.

It was spring-tide in the fashionable world; that period of the summer in which the weather is sure to be at its hottest, and space to turn round is not to be found for love or money in the West End of London. The season had reached its culminating point; acquaintances left off asking each other, "When did you come to town?" but had not yet begun to inquire, "When do you go away?" Balls, drums, breakfasts, every resort for those amusements which so often fail to amuse was crowded to overflowing; a stall at the French play costs more than a French bonnet, and for an opera-box people

paid as much as would have purchased a cow. Everybody complained of the heat, the crush, the hurry, worry, and discomfort; but everybody went everywhere just the same.

No place could be fuller than the Park. The footway, fairly impassable for the throng, was choked with a mass of broadcloth, false hair, and muslin. The penny chairs were occupied, every one, and the men with the badges, who have never in my recollection owned to a good season, were undoubtedly making *their* hay while the sun shone. In the Ride, horse after horse, singly, by pairs, by threes, by squadrons, passed and repassed in one unbroken stream, to excite wonder, perhaps, rather than admiration, that amongst so many animals there should be so few the bystander would desire to call his own. Beautiful girls, with slender figures, tightly knotted chignons, or loosely floating hair, galloped up and down at a pace that seemed perilous to their companions, and that must have raised their bodily temperature to a degree of heat uncomfortable for themselves, while stout matrons and calm old gentlemen, perspiring more or less, toiled after them in vain. Here and there, a couple loitered leisurely along under the shady trees, with loose reins and wistful faces, speaking in soft low whispers, or, deadlier still, looking straight between their horses' ears in ominous silence. Since the young Border chief carried off his bride from Netherby, despite of kith and din, Fosters, Fenwicks, Musgraves, and all the "racing and chasing o'er Cannobie Lea," no love-making has been more successful than that which is done on horseback. The very attitude seems suggestive of grace, pliability, and dependence on another; the exercise combines just so much of firmness as infers strength

of character, with so much of daring as promises a venture for better or worse when the right time comes, while the distance that must of necessity be preserved between the couple causes many a half-formed whisper to fall unheard, and leaves to imagination that which is never understood so satisfactorily as when it remains unspoken, though expressed.

Far down the drive, from Albert Gate to Hyde Park Corner, pony-carriages, victorias, barouches, and broughams formed one continuous line, panels and harness glittering with paint and varnish, maid and matron blooming in their bright and various colours, like a bed of flowers. Here, too, were congregated irreproachable dandies, who either did not possess horses, or found riding incompatible with the superstition of the hour. Those who had waists, rested one neat boot on the box of the wheel, in an attitude that displayed the symmetry of a manly shape to the best advantage. While those who were not so faultless in figure, made play with smiles, and nods, and killing glances from under the brims of their white hats.

To spectators, nothing could appear fuller of mystery and excitement than these conversations ; to listeners, such as the coachman and footman, nothing could be more dull and uninteresting. Many a man has the knack of observing, "it is a fine day," with all the outward semblance of one who proposes immediate elopement. Many a lady says she "thinks it's going to rain," with such bright glances and sweet smiles, as seem to yield the willing consent that pledges her to become an accessory before the fact.

A young gentleman, who had easily persuaded his sister Jemima to lend him her bay mare, found

himself rather lost and lonely in the midst of all these well-dressed people, scarcely one of whom he knew even by sight. A good temper, a cricketer's digestion, an utter absence of conceit, and an Eton education, will do much to counteract the shyness that, arising in self-consciousness, is inseparable from youth, but it takes many years, and, alas! many disillusions, to acquire that front of brass which arms the veteran, for whom the conflict has no terrors, no triumphs, and no excitement. His harness may be of proof, but he wears it at the cost of all his finest fancies, all his brightest romance. What would he not give to go down once more naked into the battle, and feel the shafts of the adversary biting as of old to the quick!

When our young gentleman left the paternal dwelling in Belgravia, he considered himself turned out in irreproachable style. His mother's scent-bottle, his sister's hair-wash, and, I fancy, his father's boot-varnish, had all been laid under contribution. The bay mare's coat shone like satin, and the whole thing, as reflected in Gunter's windows, seemed to him very good. Strange that, in so short a distance as lies between Lowndes Street and Albert Gate, the mere force of comparison could have effected so complete a disenchantment! Passing into the Ride, Jemima's bay mare collapsed into a moderate palfrey, her rider sank from a smart young dandy to an over-dressed schoolboy. His collar felt too limp, his hat too stiff, his boots, in spite of the paternal varnish, seemed clumsy without feeling comfortable, and a button came off his glove.

Had he not met Annie Dennison, or had she failed to speak to him when she did, I believe our young gentleman would have turned out of the Park incontinently, smarting under a sense of ignominious defeat.

The greeting, however, of so pretty and distinguished-looking a young lady reassured him, and when she desired him to accompany herself and her cavalier, he turned his horse round with a sensation of gratified vanity and renewed self-confidence, no less unreasonable than his previous discomfiture and dismay.

Her General, as Annie called him, was always frank and soldier-like; he shook the young gentleman cordially by the hand, asked when he was going to join his regiment, and while Perigord explained his present position, not very briefly, was obviously thinking of something else.

"Left Mr. Lexley!" exclaimed Annie, in a tone of astonishment. "Not going back! Abandoned poor dear old Middleton and the Priors for ever! (General, who's that bowing?—the man with a white hat and a red nose.) Mr. Perigord, tell the truth—you've been getting into scrapes. I know you have, and poor Mr. Lexley has been obliged to rusticate you. That's the word."

"Never mind," said the General, turning sharp round on both. "Nothing to be ashamed of. Old Marchare was rusticated from Oxford. I've heard him say so a hundred times. He was my colonel when I began soldiering, and a smarter officer never handled a regiment. You'll return to your duty, I suppose, Mr. Perigord, when your time is out?"

With some confusion the youth explained how his departure from his tutor's house was in no way connected with misconduct, and how he carried with him that tutor's goodwill and approval into the life on which he hoped soon to enter. He could not help thinking the General's interest diminished sensibly during his narrative.

"The greeting..... reassured him"

"But *why* did you leave?" asked Annie, with a woman's persistent curiosity.

The boy was a gentleman to the backbone. His instincts had already warned him that of the late catastrophe at Lexley's vicarage the less said the better, and he prevaricated with a good feeling that, unless all prevarication be unjustifiable, did honour to his heart.

"I didn't like reading quite so hard," said he, "and I'm afraid I didn't get on. My tutor must have seen it, and wrote to my father to take me away."

"Didn't like reading?" laughed the General. "None of you do. Don't like it myself. What? Like riding a great deal better, I daresay. I'll overtake you in a moment, Annie. There's the Duke beckoning."

So while General Pike reined in his horse with his hat off, Miss Dennison and her young cavalier rode on by themselves, much to the delight of the latter, who expressed his gratification in his own frank, boyish way.

"Do you know, I was beginning to feel quite lost and uncomfortable amongst all these swells when I saw you," said he, "but I'm not afraid of any of them now; for it seems to me that you and General (what did you say his name is?) are the biggest swells of the lot. I say, Miss Dennison, if I was to see you at a ball, would you dance with me? Just once, you know. If you weren't engaged to anyone else?"

"Of course I would!" answered Annie, laughing; "and go to supper with you too. I never forget my old friends. You and I were great allies at the Priors. What a pleasant time we had there!" added the young lady, with a little sigh.

"Hadn't we?" responded Perigord. "Wasn't it jolly in the frost?"

"And wasn't it nice when the thaw came that evening, and Mr. Foster was so pleased? I mean the day Mr. Mortimer and—and Mr. Maxwell came down."

Again Miss Annie sighed,—this time a little deeper than before.

"There *is* Mr. Mortimer!" she exclaimed, after a moment's silence, and put her horse into a canter, with a brighter colour than usual in her cheek.

On the neatest hack in London, with the best-fitting coat, the smoothest hat, the most imperturbable air of prosperity and self-confidence, Percy Mortimer overtook the pair, and while he made his bow to Miss Dennison betrayed just enough certainty of being welcome to provoke her exceedingly. No woman, I believe, cares for a man who is really her slave, but in all ages the sex has appreciated extreme deference of outward manner as highly as the resolution and recklessness of consequences it so often conceals. Reach out and pluck the fruit vigorously if you will, but always remember the hand must be daintily gloved, and that which is ruthlessly extorted by force or address must seem to be waited for with patience, accepted with humility and thanks.

Mortimer's horse could, of course, walk faster and canter slower than any other animal in the Park. It is needless to say that a more perfect mount for London purposes could not be procured at any price, or that it represented a cheque for three figures in his banker's account. Percy never grudged money, but always took care to have his money's worth. It was said of him at Oxford that if he paid more for wax candles than any other man in his college, they came

from the best shop in London, and returned their full value in light.

Riding an animal so well-shaped, so well-bitted, and well-broken, nothing could be easier than to range up alongside of a young lady at a canter, without seeming to pursue her indiscreetly, or to rein in for her with that overdone affectation of surprise which palpably defeats its object. A turn of the wrist, a touch of the leg, and Mortimer's horse was adapting itself to the pace of Miss Dennison's as if the same volition moved both. The young lady loved a canter only less than a gallop. That she should have pulled back to a walk when joined by this additional cavalier, looked as if she was put out.

"If I bore you, say so," observed Percy, carefully readjusting the hat he had removed for his salute; "but don't worry your horse's mouth because you are tired of me. I feel I am getting a bore. Old Pike wouldn't look at me just now. Perhaps he's jealous. Miss Dennison, I'll promise to go away after I've shaken hands with Mr. Perigord, who has forgotten me, though I am delighted to see him."

Percy was good-humoured, even when making love—a very strong test, and such good-humour is highly contagious.

Perigord felt gratified, and Annie, half provoked, though she did not know why, shook hands, and graciously permitted him to join the cavalcade under certain penalties and restrictions.

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed. "You don't bore me more than other people, except when you will explain things I don't want to understand. Yes, you may ride with us as far as the end."

"And back again?"

"Well, back again too, perhaps, if you'll promise

not to mention any country but England, and not to tell any story that has the name of a mountain in it, or a river, or a prince, or an ambassador, or a savage of any description. Now, go on!"

"With a story? Well, the only story I can invent at this moment is that I don't like riding with a certain young lady by the Serpentine"—

"Stop, you've not kept to the bargain; that's the name of a river."

"And of a savage, too, is it not? Miss Dennison, I have fallen into your displeasure, and when you are displeased, no cannibal is more merciless. Well, you may take my scalp if you like, with the little hair that is left on it. Head too, for the matter of that. What's the use of a man's head when his heart is gone?"

She stopped him angrily, yet relented almost immediately. He could not be in earnest, she thought, with that pleasant smile on his face.

"Don't talk sentiment," she exclaimed. "It's worse than travels or adventures, or even politics. You're not a bad guesser. I am a little put out; but I've no right to be cross with you."

"I wish you had," said he in a low voice, bringing his horse so near that the buckle of her surcingle rasped his knee. "People think I'm not in earnest because I never make long faces; but there are some things I can be very much in earnest about, Miss Dennison, and this is one of them."

For all answer Miss Dennison stopped short and turned her horse's head towards the carriage drive. "There's Lettie!" she exclaimed, "and Aunt Emily. Come with me, Mr. Perigord; I think I can do something for you that you will like."

"Shall I see you to-night?" asked Percy in a

whisper, regretting his question, as having played a wrong card, the moment it was uttered. He ought to have galloped off and pretended to be in a huff; their next meeting, he reflected, would then have produced an explanation, and in an explanation it is not out of place to ask a serious question, and wait for a serious answer.

"Of course you will," said the young lady pettishly, "if you're not too fine to go to Lettie's ball. But I never promised to dance with you, mind, and you haven't asked me," she added, with a coquettish smile, for she *had* been rather short with him, she thought, and it would be a pity to affront and lose him altogether.

At this particular period Miss Dennison was sorely exercised in her mind as regarded Percy Mortimer. She would, and she would not. A girl soon discovers that she has made an impression, and though the gentleman was cool, cautious, full of tact, and, to use a Scotch expression, "never reached his hand out farther than he could draw it back again," she was perfectly satisfied, she had only to stretch her own ever such a little, for that hand to be offered her at once. Far be it from me to say that women are less romantic than ourselves, though I can call to mind follies perpetrated by strong, out-spoken, beer-drinking, tobacco-smoking idiots, fallen helplessly in love, that I would challenge all the ladies' schools in all the suburbs of London to outdo; but I hold that they are more inclined to wade into matrimony unconstrained by affection, than the less domestic sex, partly because they have been brought up to consider that institution as their prerogative and eventual destiny, partly because they can more easily attach themselves to the abstract idea of a husband, and find it realised

in almost any individual whose society they are expressly forbidden to affect.

Annie had hardly left off practising her scales before she learned to acknowledge the necessity of marrying somebody at some future time. It was only a question when the hour should come, and the man!

Percy Mortimer possessed, doubtless, many attractions; none perhaps stronger than that half the girls in London wanted to marry him. I am convinced that when Titania fell in love with Bottom, she fancied some of the ladies about her fairy-court liked him too! Miss Dennison, in her heart of hearts, admired Horace Maxwell more than any man on earth, none the less that she was warned against him by her elderly friends, relatives, and all the sensible people who gave her good advice. But Horace was so uncertain, so ungenerous, so unfair! Sometimes she thought he cared for her, and in the very next dance he would be going on outrageously with wicked Miss This, or flirting Miss That, and she would vow to give him up, never think of him, and never so much as speak to him again. Whereas Percy was always quiet, self-contained, and consistent. The one man would make her happy! the other miserable! Need we say to which of them her heart inclined!

Mortimer, who did nothing in a hurry, or without good reasons, had come to the conclusion, that for his own comfort and respectability it would be well to share his home with somebody who would look handsome at the end of his table, keep him company in that rambling country-house, which was his only trouble in life, and nurse him when he got old and had the gout. To grow old and have the gout was Percy's embodiment of the Nemesis that overtook all men alike, but he thought he could bear it better

with Annie Dennison to take care of him. Such an idea, particularly if it had never been entertained before, soon takes root in a man's heart. As he put his horse once more into a canter, he said to himself, "I'll do it! And as it is to be done, it had better be done to-night."

In the meantime Annie had brought her young cavalier to the side of the barouche in which Mrs. Pike and Mrs. Dennison were enjoying the summer air, balmy and fragrant, in spite of gas, dust, horse-flesh, harness-paste, and all the other odours with which it was flavoured. "Lettie," she exclaimed, bestowing a bright smile on her friend, "let me introduce Mr. Perigord, one of my partners, dear. And, Lettie, will you do me a favour?"

Mrs. Pike, a very pretty blonde woman, with a white dress, white bonnet, white teeth, and a white parasol, knew what was coming perfectly, and replied graciously, with a smile that showed the white teeth—

"Of course I will, dear; but what have you done with your General?"

Mrs. Pike always spoke of him to Annie as the personal property of the latter.

"Oh! I left him talking to a *very* great man, and that tiresome Mr. Mortimer has been riding with us, and I've been looking for you everywhere. Lettie, will you send Mr. Perigord an invitation to your ball?"

"Delighted," answered Mrs. Pike, who did everything in the pleasantest manner, thus taking the young gentleman captive at once. "You are staying at your father's, I suppose? You shall have a card directly I get home."

"It's for to-night, you know," said Mrs. Dennison, in her deep warning tones. "I daresay you haven't

got any gloves, nor anything. No young man under twenty has any business at a ball."

"He's coming to dance with *me*," interposed Annie, good-naturedly covering her young swain's discomfiture; and the General making his appearance at last, the three, as far as their roads lay in the same direction, rode home together to dress for dinner.

A canter in the Park with an admirer, who, if not precisely, is very nearly the right one, with the prospect of a pleasant ball in the evening, ought not to put a young lady in low spirits; yet, while she dressed her, Miss Dennison's maid could not but observe a slight tinge of red about her eyelids, nor fail to notice the smothered sigh that rose every now and then, as if from an aching heart.

Annie had left the Park gay, laughing, jesting with her General, who, as in duty bound, saw her safe to her uncle's door. She climbed the stairs to her own room, pale, sorrowful, preoccupied, with a languid step and a troubled feeling in her breast, of mingled pique, vexation, and despair.

Down a bye-street near her own home she had espied a well-known figure that of late she had seen oftener in her dreams, alas! than in her waking hours, and that figure was not alone.

Horace Maxwell, talking and gesticulating eagerly, seemed pleading with his companion, whose shape, gait, and gestures there was no mistaking. It was surely none other than the tall clergyman's wife, Mrs. Lexley, formerly Miss Blair.

"No, I won't wear that dress," she said, to her maid's astonishment. It was a costume Horace once admired, and had been so great a favourite as to have undergone many renewals of trimming and other repairs. "Take it away. I hate the sight of it. I shall never wear it again."

CHAPTER XVII

WORK

WHEN Laura left Mr. Lexley's house it was with the firm determination never to return, never to let him see her face, nor, after one letter of farewell, to hear of her existence again. She took her measures with a prudence and precaution learned in the vicissitudes of her former life. She was Mrs. Lexley when she got into the train, and when the porter called for a cab for her at the platform in London; but she became Mrs. Laxton while that cab was dismissed in the street, and, carrying her own modest bundle, she took another round the corner. Then she drove to a quiet hotel near a large railway station, and slept—no, not slept—but passed the night there. Next day, after purchasing mourning attire, and disposing at a loss of some valuable jewels, wedding presents from the Dennison family and Mrs. Lexley's relations, she proceeded, with such another change of cabs as obliterated all trace of her movements, to establish herself in a humble lodging, where she wrote her last letter to her husband, and began a new life.

I have heard a theory broached by men, generally under thirty, who profess to understand the sex, that women with grey eyes, like Minerva, are colder, bolder, more resolute, and more enduring than the others; but that for him who can elicit the love-

light that causes those grey eyes to shine and deepen, they are invariably loving, devoted, and true to the death. In Laura's grey eyes there had lurked a world of tenderness and affection on the lawn among the roses. Scanning the shabby furniture of the dusty little London lodging, it was sad to think they should be so cold and hard and tearless now.

She wondered at her own composure. She could even take an interest in her own precautions to avoid that detection by the man she loved, of which she must not think, because of the cruel hunger to see his face again. She recalled, with a smile that had in it little of mirth, the ingenuity of certain Red Indians whom she had once seen in her wanderings, taking measures to destroy the trail by which their pursuers might have hunted them to death, and thought bitterly that these had only been devising means for securing their own safety, while she must exercise her wit and tax her experience to shut out from her weary eyes the only gleam of light left on this side the grave.

But she did it resolutely! Was it not for *his* sake? On this consideration she dared not dwell, lest it might so soften her that she should but weep; feeling, if she once gave way, the strength would never come back that now enabled her to fight on.

She sat down and confronted her position, with the calm, defiant courage of her character. A prouder woman did not exist; but hers was the pride that rises in disaster, and becomes only more stubborn the more it has to sustain. Delancy's Yankee partner was no mean judge of human nature, extracting, as he did, a comfortable livelihood from its weaknesses.

"A stiffer upper lip than your good lady keeps,"

he once observed to his confederate, "I never saw on man or woman. It's a'most a beautiful face is Mrs. D.'s. But I larned reading, Squire, at a free-school down to Albany, long ago. Guess I can read 'No' there, as plain as print."

The jewels had realised a few pounds; she had brought away a few more from her home. The articles of clothing she required would make no great inroad on this little fund; but say it lasted a month or two, what then? Some plan must be devised to get more. Laura could think of nothing better than the old trade among the old employers. Her musical proficiency would at any time have furnished ample means of livelihood, had she consented to play in public; but this was to court detection, and detection meant persecution from the man she had married; shame to the man she loved. No; she must grind on at the old wearing employment, teaching their notes to beginners, who had neither ear, nor touch, nor inclination to learn. She set about it at once. Attired in deep mourning, keeping down to the simplicity of a Quakeress all the accessories of her costume, yet looking only the more queenly the plainer she was dressed, Mrs. Laxton, as she now called herself, started on her round of visits amongst the parents of her old pupils, and soon found that in the occupation of a music-mistress, as in all other affairs of life, the *status ante* can never be regained. "One down, another comes on," is the rule of existence. The loss of a pains-taking instructress, however much bewailed at the time, had long since been replaced; and Miss Blair in two years was as completely forgotten as if she had never been. A pianoforte maker, indeed, now doing a large business, whom her good word had brought into notice, bestirred himself on her behalf,

and gave her a recommendation to what he called "a genteel family residing in the suburbs." There were a good many young people, he informed her, adding sensibly enough, "that it was an opening, if nothing else." So Laura started, one hot afternoon, by the Underground Railway, to take her chance.

Pacing wearily to and fro in the airless vaulted tunnel, while she waited for a train, the force of contrast brought vividly before her the peaceful parsonage, with its cool rooms, its shady porch, its trim lawns, and gorgeous rose-garden. Plunged in a day-dream, she seemed to be at home,—yes, had it not been the only real home she ever knew?—at home once more, waiting breakfast for him, in her clear white muslins, so fresh and airy; so different from the suffocating crape and velveteen she must always wear now—waiting for *him* to come down, with his happy smile, his kind frank voice, his pleasant greeting to the pupil, who responded merrily; his tall manly form bending with a courtesy that enhanced his affection, when he even looked at *her*. Oh! to see something, were it but a dog, that would remind her of the dear old times! If young Perigord could have made his appearance at that moment, she must have fallen on his neck and wept.

"Look sharp, marm, or you'll lose the train!" said a voice at the level of her shoulder, while a fat little man, in a white heat, caught her unceremoniously by the elbow, and pushed her through the door of a second-class carriage, into which he bundled after her, wiping his face, and chuckling audibly, as having "nicked it, just in time," to use his own expression, "for the two of us!" while Laura, waking to consciousness, and the remembrance of

where she was, felt she hated him for his good-nature.

She was so handsome, that she had always been used to those little civilities affording excuse for conversation, which men of all ranks and ages are apt to offer an attractive fellow-traveller, and knew as well as any woman how to distinguish between an attention and an impertinence. The fat little man, in spite of his figure and his accent, was chivalrous as Bayard; and although he seemed to consider that his presence of mind in rousing her, when the train arrived, gave him a vested interest in the beautiful woman who sat opposite, his tone, though unpolished, was respectful, his manner, though ludicrous, was deferential in the extreme. She found herself listening to his conversation with a vague sense of relief from the burden of her own thoughts.

He considered it polite to inform her how he came to be on the platform the very moment the train arrived, in which they were then seated, and which, in her abstraction, she would have allowed to pass on. This entailed a minute account of his morning's proceedings, how many hides, for his business was "Hides an' Tallow, marm, you'll excuse me," he had bought in the City, with a masterly exposition of that precarious trade, accounting for the rise of the one article and fall of the other. The cabman who had overcharged him was not forgotten, nor his successful resistance to such extortion; the 'bus, as he called it, which took him in five minutes to his place of business from the Bank, met with a qualified approval, but of all conveniences, he was sure the lady would agree with him, "as this here Underground was *the* invention of modern times, and however we got on without

'em, afore we had 'em, beat him now, that it did, when he came to think of it! But you has to look sharp, marm. Time's money, you know—miss a train and you loses ten minutes. That's why I made bold to give you the office, marm, just now!"

The quiet thanks this observation elicited rendered him more voluble than ever.

"Time's money, marm, no doubt, in this here great commercial country. Why, in my business, now, if the markets are pretty brisk, and there's anything like competition, I've known it rule as high as a pound a minute, say. I can't afford to lose ten minutes, I can't, nor yet five. I'm a family man, I am; eight o' 'em, boys and girls, beautiful and dutiful—that's without reckoning the baby. We never make much account of *our* babies, not till after they're weaned."

"Indeed," said Laura, "that's a fine family."

She was wondering vaguely at her companion. In her varied experience she had never met a specimen of the domestic, commercial, middle-class Londoner before. It rested her weary mind to watch his peculiarities; he awoke no painful memories, stirred no chord of sympathy, but she felt grateful to him that for a while he took her out of herself.

"It *is* a fine family," answered the little man proudly. "My mother was a fine woman, my wife is a fine woman, my eldest daughter will be a fine woman. When I see a fine woman I respect and admire her. There's no such object in nature. It's like looking at Saint Paul's or the river from London Bridge. No offence, marm, this here's my station, and excuse me, I can't help seeing your ticket—I believe it's yours."

The little man's tone was so friendly, and at the same time so devoid of all presumption, that Laura,

whose head was confused with the turning and intricacies of the way out, asked him to direct her to her destination when they emerged together on the street. His face was radiant.

"Paradise Grove!" he exclaimed. "Why, I live there myself. I'm going there now. What part was you wishing to find? Our Grove is rural and scattered, you see; but bless ye, I knows every house in it as well as I knows my own shop in Thames Street."

"Larkspur Hall," answered Laura, reading from a card in her hand.

"Name of Grote!" exclaimed the little man. "That's *my* name. Larkspur Hall; that's *my* house. *I'm* Mr. Grote; and my missis," he added, as an afterthought, "in course is Mrs. Grote."

"Then I shall hope to find Mrs. Grote at home," said Laura quietly. "I have been directed to apply to her, as I hear she requires a music-mistress for her young people."

In describing his feelings on a subsequent occasion to his eldest daughter, Mr. Grote protested that this simple statement fairly deprived him of breath.

"You might have knocked me down with a feather," said he; "I was that bamboozled and took aback. It wasn't her dress, Selina, nor yet the 'aughty way she carried her 'ead, but it was her manners. I never was deceived in manners afore, and the first moment as I clapped eyes on her a standin' there in a brown study on the platform, I said to myself, says I, Second-class, or third-class, or first-class, if that one's not a West-ender I'll eat her! And to think she could have comed all the way only wanting to be *your* music-mistress. Well, to be sure!"

In the meantime the happy father of the Grote family could do no less than direct his new acquaintance to his home.

"Not a quarter of a mile off," said he, opening his eyes wide with astonishment. "Good situation; airy, salubrious; trains to the City every ten minutes, and a 'bus every quarter of an hour. Deary, deary me!"

In his distraction he quoted unconsciously from the house-agent's advertisement that first tempted him, but the ejaculation which concluded the sentence was his own.

Nearing Larkspur Hall, Mr. Grote's confidence began to wane. What if Mrs. Grote should be at the front window, and detect him thus walking side by side with a lady of Laura's stature and general appearance? "Grand, stylish," thought the little man, scanning his companion with stealthy glances as she moved gracefully along. "Five feet seven *and* a quarter, in satin shoes, if she's a hinch. Mag—nificent!" Mrs. Grote was a prey to jealousy, and he would hear of it again. When they reached the gate of a little apology for a garden between the door-step and the street, he hung back and devoted his attention to cleaning his boots at the scraper.

In vain. When did such paltry subterfuge ever avail the married man, conscious he has fallen short by ever so little of his domestic duty? Mrs. Grote, whose eye, and indeed her nose also, was that of a hawk, taking advantage of her stature as a "fine woman" to peer over the parlour blinds, was no less shocked than astonished at the deportment and what she called the "goings-on" of her husband, from the moment he entered the purlieus of the Grove. He *did* hear of it afterwards, again and again and again,—but this has nothing to do with my story.

Laura had met many stately dames and female magnates of various kinds both at home and abroad, but had never yet encountered anything to equal the dignity of Mrs. Grote, when, in obedience to the summons of a remarkably untidy maid, she entered that lady's presence in the front parlour. She did not even rise from her chair when the visitor came in, but contented herself with a supercilious stare, conveying as much offence as was compatible with stern and contemptuous silence.

Poor Laura was obliged to speak first: "I have taken the liberty of calling on you, madam," said she, "in consequence of a communication I have received from Messrs. Peddell and Co., stating that you require a music-mistress for your children."

"Oh dear no!" said the other; "you must have been misinformed. My young people have already received the very best instruction. At the same time, if your proficiency is really first-class, your testimonials undeniable, and your references of course satisfactory, Mrs. — Mrs. — I have yet to learn your name."

"Laxton," answered Laura, keeping down a sob.

"Mrs. Laxton. A widow, I presume. I say if your references were wholly unimpeachable—for I am most particular on that point—and your terms moderate, I might take your proposal into consideration."

"Couldn't I begin soon?" faltered Laura. "It is a great object to me to get employment, and my terms are low enough, God knows."

Mrs. Grote frowned. "I am not accustomed to this kind of language," said she; "nor do I consider your appearance and manners those of a person whom I should wish to admit on terms of intimacy into my family."

"And I am not accustomed to be insulted!" retorted Laura, leaving the room with a toss of her head and a sweep of her dress that reduced Mrs. Grote into utter insignificance; but she was sorry for it five minutes afterwards, for she felt she had thrown a chance away.

Grote was sorry, too, watching her departure from an upper chamber. It would have added no little to the ornamental part of his daily life, that this handsome music-mistress should have gone to and fro, by omnibus or Underground Railway, to make harmony in Larkspur Hall. He was more sorry still when dinner-time drew near, and having been subjected to a searching cross-examination by his wife, he was sent to Coventry for the rest of the night.

Mrs. Laxton had asserted herself; and perhaps any other lady would have done as much under like provocation; but although the little excitement of the contest did her good, its effects soon wore off, and with them vanished the resentment she now felt such a woman as Mrs. Grote ought never to have been able to arouse. "What is the matter with me?" thought Laura; "I used to be as hard as the nether mill-stone! Even Mr. Delancy couldn't make me angry, and Heaven knows he was very trying! My nerves must be failing, or my health or something. My knees actually shook while that odious, vulgar woman dared to speak so rudely. It was temper, not weakness, that's one comfort. But I used to be able to command my temper so beautifully when it was irritated twenty times a day. And now it fails me at the first trial. Oh, Algy—how you have spoilt me, my darling! It seems too hard—too hard—that I must never see your face again."

She put down her veil, for the tears would not

be denied now, and so, weeping silently, wended her way back, a lonely, broken-hearted woman, in the crowded streets of London.

What a long and weary walk it was! Past Paddington Green, down the Edgware Road, across the dusty, wind-swept waste of Hyde Park, that lies between the Marble Arch and the Serpentine, with eyes aching in the glare, and mouth parched to suffocation under the thick, choking veil, that must be lifted but an inch at a time for fear of recognition. A foot-guardsman, with two medals on his breast, carrying a clothes-basket, looked after her in mingled pity and admiration, regretting that she seemed a real lady, and however tired, he must not therefore offer her the consolation of beer. A flaunting woman, handsome, red-faced, and dirty, with rings on her ungloved hands, laughed loud as she passed. A stunted youth, smoking a bad cigar, leered in her face and then followed close on her footsteps, till the appearance of a policeman caused him to slink sulkily away. She felt as if she alone, of all the people in this great swarming metropolis, had no established place—no right to be here. "I'm not bad enough for that yet," she thought, looking at the cool, shining Serpentine; "but God knows what one may come to. I can already understand why friendless women jump off the bridges in this great heartless town! No, I won't do that. I shall never see him again here; but who knows?—I may find him perhaps somewhere or somehow hereafter!"

The reflection seemed to give her fresh courage, and by the time she reached the confines of the Park, her step had regained its elasticity, and in gait and bearing she was herself again.

Laura was a difficult person to disguise. It was all very well to change her name for Laxton, to put

on deep mourning, and draw a double veil over her face, but a figure like hers once seen could not easily be forgotten. Perhaps of all her personal advantages, her walk and manner were the most prepossessing. Horace Maxwell, lounging home to dress for dinner, recognised these at fifty paces off, though her back was turned, and asking himself in languid astonishment what Mrs. Lexley could be doing in London, gave chase without delay. When he came up with her, and put out his hand, she had not the heart to refuse it. Had there been time for consideration, she might perhaps have perpetrated the absurdity of pretending to ignore him, and hurried on with bent head and lowered veil, till a passing cab or omnibus should place her out of reach; but she was so lonely, so wretched, it was so refreshing to meet a gentleman again; she had always liked Horace, too, and for a few hours had even condescended to amuse herself by captivating him. No wonder she obeyed her first impulse, and greeted him with undisguised delight.

Neglecting the first principles of agreeable conversation, which forbid inquiries after anybody, Horace tumbled neck and crop into a solecism at the earliest opportunity by the awkward question, "Is Lexley in town, and where are you both staying?"

She raised her veil now, and looked him full in the face. He was shocked to see how deep a mark sorrow had already set on that commanding beauty which so struck him a few months ago.

"Mr. Maxwell," she said in a low, earnest voice, "do you remember the first secret between you and me?"

"I am not likely to forget it," answered Horace, who never could talk to a woman quite as he would to a man.

"Do you remember what you said about a gentleman?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lexley. 'Honour among thieves,' and 'Love laughs at locksmiths,' have been the two maxims of my life."

"Then I will trust to your honour, as I did once before. Mr. Maxwell, I am very unhappy—I am in a very painful position. I have left my home—I have left my—Mr. Lexley, never to return. I cannot explain why, any more than I could explain that evening at the Priors how I came to know Mr. Mortimer. I am in London alone, without a friend in the world. Stop! I trust you because you are a gentleman. I *mean* to be alone—I *mean* to be without a friend; and I charge you *as* a gentleman to respect my confidence. Never attempt to see me, never recognise me if we meet, never tell a living being you found me here to-day. If you play me false, you will drive me from this great swarming town, my only refuge, and where can I hide my head then but in the grave?"

"You distress me," said Horace, "even more than you puzzle me. Of course I will keep your secret, of course I will respect your confidence. But to be alone and friendless in London means also to be helpless and—and—perhaps straitened in circumstances. You will at least let me know where you live."

He was interested. He was thoroughly in earnest. He pitied her from his heart, and he showed it in his manner. While he was thus absorbed, Annie Dennison passed a few paces off on horseback unobserved, and saw him pleading earnestly with the lady of whom she had been so mistrustful when she was Miss Blair. Poor Annie would have died rather than owned how much it hurt her.

But all his arguments and entreaties were in vain. Laura stood firm, denied him her address, would not consent to see him, hear from him, hold any communication with him again. The utmost he could get her to concede was that if at a future time she should find herself in dire need or deadly sickness, she would let him know, on the solemn condition that, even in such extremity, he would never reveal the secret of her hiding-place to a soul.

"Promise me that, Mr. Maxwell," said she, while he held her hand at the corner of a bye-street, "on your honour as a gentleman, and promise me, too, that you will try not to think of me so badly as I seem to deserve."

Then she dropped her veil and left him, feeling she had severed the last link that bound her to her former life.

Maxwell looked after her long and wistfully, sorely tempted to follow and find out where she lived, in defiance of her express instructions.

"What ought I to do?" thought this perplexed squire of dames. "In all my experience I have never been so completely at sea. She might starve. By Jove! I believe she *would* starve rather than let one know. What is she up to? I can't make her out. Then there's Lexley. Poor old chap!—right or wrong, it will break his heart. Surely it would be only fair to let him know. I'll ask Percy. Hang it! I can't—I gave my word of honour. And, after all, one *is* a gentleman! It's very inconvenient—very. Poor thing! How she has gone off, and how handsome I used to think her before—before I made such an ass of myself about the other one! What a trouble women are, to be sure! In the meantime, I must go and dress."

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. PIKE'S BALL

WHATEVER sorrows young ladies think well to cherish in the privacy of their own chambers, or even in presence of a confidential maid, they take care to hide every trace of vexation and anxiety when they emerge radiant before the world, going down to battle armed at all points, and thirsting for the fray. Annie Dennison never looked prettier in her life than while she stood at the top of Mrs. Pike's staircase, helping her friend to receive some of the best, and, we may be permitted to hope, the most virtuous people in London, who came to swell her ball.

Mrs. Pike had no young ladies of her own, that is to say, in a ball-going sense; the two mites she took about in her victoria being as yet removed by many years from the period of emancipation and flirtation; but she loved Annie dearly as a sister, if indeed that expression conveys true attachment. And it was understood by all the worthy guests who were likely to send invitations of repayment that this ball of Mrs. Pike's was given for Miss Dennison.

A very ornamental couple they were, making courtesy after courtesy in return for the greetings of those who bowed, shook hands, and passed on. "Dear Lettie, you look so nice!" had been Annie's exclamation when she arrived, early of course, while

taking in at a glance her friend's entire toilette—white dress, white flowers, white skin, white teeth, and white fan, as usual.

"Dear Annie, if it comes off at *my* ball I shall be so pleased!" replied the matron, with a meaning smile that caused the young lady to frown a little and sigh a little, though she did not blush at all. Nevertheless, there was the sparkle of a conqueror in Miss Dennison's eye, and whether or not she proposed giving quarter to the vanquished, there seemed little doubt that she would herself come off triumphant in the strife.

The General looked splendid. To use Percy Mortimer's expression, he was "all over the place." Amongst the dancers, amongst the chaperons, amongst the waiters in the supper-room, the very link-men in the street—he seemed simply ubiquitous, and wherever his bald head was seen to shine, his energetic gloves to wave, there order was re-established, and perfect discipline prevailed once more.

Even Mrs. Dennison, who, difficult to please, and protesting all the while, had left her husband fast asleep in his arm-chair, to bring her diamonds here, in their old-fashioned setting, condescended to express approval. The General was so eager, so energetic, so demonstrative, "so different from your uncle, my dear," as she observed to Annie, and in such comparison summed up her utmost meed of praise.

People were trooping in by scores. Carriage-lamps winked and glowed all down the street, all about the square, and half a mile round the corner, while broughams and family-coaches that had not yet set down, crept onward in an endless string. Crowds of parti-coloured footmen thronged the entrance. Billows of red, white, and variegated wrappings rose mountain-high in the cloak-room,

where Mrs. Pike's maid and Annie's rushed about in the smartest of gowns with pincushions in their hands, scrutinising every lady's dress as she came in, and keeping all its details in mind for a week. Beautiful women moved stately, as in procession, up the stairs, their sweeping draperies, graceful figures, and abundant hair showing to advantage in the flood of light that streamed from the ball-room; while here and there a lovely head was turned, a pair of lustrous eyes smiled down on some favoured object in the crowd below, and the object pressing a flat hat against his heart, while he begged somebody's pardon at every step, followed as best he might. The confusion of tongues was great, the conversation voluble if not instructive, tinged, it may be, with a certain sameness; and remarkable for that brevity which is said to be the soul of wit.

"Been here long?"—"Just come."—"Going on to Lady Boreall's?"—"You cut me to-day in the Park. I've taken our stalls for Saturday."—"What a bad dinner!"—"Who's that in pink? She's not so pretty as her sister. Did you get my note? Give us the first round?—The next?"—"Can't; I'm full, all but one square."

Dancing had begun in earnest. Black coats and blonde heads were whirling about in clouds of lace, tulle, and transparencies filmy and delicate as the gossamer on a June meadow at dawn. Here and there a lady whose dancing days were over, quitted her seat by the wall, and sought the tea-room, on the same arm, perhaps, that had supported her through unforgotten waltzes twenty years ago. She used to blush then with a shy delight, and it was pleasing to observe that although but a question of temperature, she had a good deal of colour still. Already certain alcoves, and places of retirement,

conspicuous for their very pretence of seclusion, were occupied by whispering couples, who had, however, the good taste not to remain too long in the same spot, and looked more or less relieved when their *tête-à-tête* was over. A strain of dance-music, sad for its very sweetness, rose and sank, and swelled, and even paused for a measured space, to wail again, sadder, sweeter, softer than before, while with deepening eyes, flushing cheeks, panting bosoms, and thrilling whispers, the magic circles were completed again and again, and with pleading entreaties for "just one turn more," yet again. Mrs. Pike was pleased to think how well it was all going off, and Horace Maxwell, having made his bow, contemplated the scene from the doorway, with wandering, hankering eyes, that, like sea-birds of the Bosphorus, flitting from wave to wave, sought, but seemed not to find, the wished-for place of rest.

A prosperous dame of a certain age, whose aquiline features and lavender dress presented a marked resemblance to a Dorking hen, introduced him in vain to her solitary chick, with whom, in consideration that he had dined at her papa's twice, he certainly ought to have danced once. A spinster, whose day for waltzing should have been past, though her time for marriage seemed not yet to have arrived, looked imploringly at him over her fan; yet he remained a man of stone. Even Mrs. Pike's good-natured, "Dear Mr. Maxwell, go and get a partner," failed to rouse his energies, while the General himself, who found a moment to shake him cordially by the hand, bounced back to his avocations, wishing that the decencies of life and his young wife's permission might only have entitled him to "show these young fellows how we used to do it in *my* time!"

But Horace felt a hundred at least, for scanning

every group of dancers, and every bench in the ball-room, he failed to discover either Annie Dennison or Percy Mortimer, and with that instinctive clairvoyance possessed by the lower animals for their well-being, but by man for the promotion of his discomfort, was satisfied that this couple, being absent, must be together.

Drawn from whatever source, the inference was right. Percy, characteristically seated in a comfortable arm-chair, with his flat hat on one footstool and his neat little boots on another, had engaged himself in an earnest conversation with Miss Dennison, to which that young lady, in a constrained attitude and a fit of vexation, at least, if not ill-humour, seemed to listen with wandering attention.

Horace, passing the door of the boudoir in which they were ensconced, did not fail to take in the situation with one rapid glance, that showed him a deeper flush than common on Annie's cheek, an unusual restlessness in the impatience with which she pulled to pieces the bouquet in her hand. Though he fleeted past like a ghost, she on her side felt, rather than saw, that he looked pale and sorrowful, with reproachful eyes that haunted her afterwards in her dreams. She had come to the ball very unhappy, but somehow she felt a little better now. Perhaps Percy, who certainly possessed the knack of amusing, made himself particularly agreeable; perhaps her own thoughts were comforting; perhaps she was conscious that she had the race in hand, could win as she liked, and might, if she chose, show *some* people that *other* people were not afraid to know their own minds.

"How you are spoiling the bouquet I sent you," said Percy, drawing, as he intended, her indignant rejoinder.

"You didn't! I got it from Uncle John."

"Then how you are spoiling Uncle John's bouquet," resumed her admirer. "Is it because you don't like flowers, or because you don't like Uncle John, or because you don't like *me*?"

"I like flowers, and I like Uncle John," replied Annie, burying her face in the disordered bouquet to hide a blush that emboldened him to proceed.

"Would you pull the flowers to pieces if I *had* sent them?" he asked, and wondered to find his heart beating, while he waited for an answer.

"You never did give me a bouquet, so how can I tell?" returned Miss Annie. "Don't you think it's very hot here? Shall we go back to the tea-room?"

"Not till we have had it out about the flowers," answered Mortimer. "If I thought it possible you could value anything I can give, I would offer you all I have in the world, encumbered only with myself. Miss Dennison, will you accept it?"

"No," whispered Annie, rising from her seat to take his arm in a perfectly friendly manner, and guide him back to the ball-room.

He was much too good a fellow and true a gentleman to show that he was hurt, though he could not but reflect that such a facer as this he had never received in his life. Refused! Distinctly and positively refused! He, Percy Mortimer, for whom half the girls in London were angling, whose experience had hitherto taught him that to ask and have, if he only asked often enough, were one and the same thing,—who piqued himself on his insensibility, his knowledge of the world, and his insight into character, affirming as he constantly did, that nobody but a fool would be so premature as to give a girl the chance of saying "No." And here had he tumbled into the scrape that of all others he

considered the most inexcusable, to emerge battered, morally sore all over, without even the satisfaction of having gained his point.

Nevertheless, he dissembled his bruises, and led Miss Dennison back to her chaperon with more than his usual courtesy, and almost all his usual bonhomie.

"You're not offended?" she whispered, pressing his arm kindly, as they approached Mrs. Pike at the door of the dancing-room.

"Not a bit," he answered in the same tone; "I'm not half good enough for you, and you were quite right." But he took leave of his hostess at once, and only breathed freely when he found himself in his overcoat on the pavement outside.

It took a long time to reach his brougham, and a minute or two to wake his servant, fast asleep on the box. Lighting a cigar, he threw himself into the carriage, and let down the front windows. "Go to Pratt's," said he, "and drive like—no—never mind. Don't hurry the old horse. After all, horses are horses, and women are—women!"

He was probably not the only man who arrived at this sage conclusion the same evening; even for the rougher sex there is a plentiful crop of vexations, anxieties, and heart-burnings to be reaped from these social gatherings. Not in the breast of maid and matron alone rankle those misgivings that rob the music of its harmony, the pillow of its slumber—even strong men, full of animal life and animal courage, can quiver down to their varnished boots because of—

"The hopes and fears that shake a single ball."

Something in Miss Dennison's face, as in his hankering, desultory lounge he passed her once more, emboldened Horace Maxwell to ask for a

dance; but he mistook her much if he thought he was to be let off so easily.

"I think I shall not stand up again," she answered, with a cold, stiff bow. "I am rather tired, and, besides, I ought to help Lettie a little with the people." But she made an exception, nevertheless, five minutes later, in favour of young Perigord, who had drowned all diffidence in champagne.

While that gentleman, rather flushed, and in the highest spirits, was accomplishing a figure requiring no little confidence, and called, I believe, the *pas seul*, a whisper ran through the company, pervading even the ranks of the dancers, concerning a stranger who had lately entered the room. "Where is he? Who asked him? Does anybody know who he is? How on earth did he get in?" was the purport of inquiring whispers that flew from lip to lip, while, with something of the instinct we see in dumb animals during a storm, parents gathered their young under their wings, the males showed an inclination not very strong towards resistance, and a general uneasiness seemed to prevail amongst the herd.

It is impossible to say how this feeling of distrust and repugnance had originated, or by what social antipathies, subtle and inexplicable, it was caused. The man looked just like anybody else. There was nothing unusual in the fit of his clothes, the colour of his gloves, or the way in which he brushed back his hair, nor was the name that he followed upstairs, beginning in the hall as Mr. Dorimer, reaching the first landing as Mr. Dormouse, and finally shouted into the ear of his hostess as Mr. Doormat, calculated to excite suspicion or alarm. Mrs. Pike received him as one of her husband's guests; the General lumped him in with a body of dancing men, invited by his wife, whom he was pleased to call the Light

Brigade, and if he thought about him at all, only wondered why he was not ten years younger, while the waiters in the supper-room, to which apartment he paid an early visit, regarded his appetite with contemptuous disapproval, as of a man who must have dined at one o'clock.

Mr. Dorimer, alias Dalton, alias Delancy, with many other useful names to be put on like false whiskers or spectacles, when required for disguise, after his late visit to Middleton, had come to London, like many innocent country gentlemen, to look for a wife. His own wife, however, was the object of his search. She had given him the slip, when she left the parsonage, and while he admired the desperate energy that had baffled his attempts at extortion "so like Laura," as he said, it was yet a point of honour with him, as well as of interest, that he should not be beaten in the game. With little difficulty he traced her to London, but there, thanks to her precautions, the track failed, and he was completely at fault.

He had gained some vague notion of her antecedents, and the names of her former friends. He had already visited one or two entertainments like the present without invitation, and while he thought it probable that he might even meet her in person, or at least gain some intelligence of her whereabouts at Mrs. Pike's ball, it seemed the simplest thing in the world to put on an evening dress, a light-haired wig, a little colouring round his eyes,—than which nothing more alters the whole expression of a man's face,—jump into a hansom, and walk confidently upstairs. That he might possibly be kicked down again was a chance hardly worth calculating to a scoundrel who had deserved and risked the galleys, the knout, and the hulks.

If he could have kept quiet, he might have escaped scatheless, but it was the man's nature to presume. Fat Lady Motherwell dropped her fan in the supper-room, he picked it up, and entered into conversation forthwith. Her ladyship, for whom it was impossible to forget a face, felt sure she had never seen him before; but thinking he might be of use to three partnerless daughters, questioned her numerous acquaintance in vain to identify the stranger. Lastly, she had recourse to one of Gunter's men, a staid personage, whose suspicions were already aroused, and who, feeling responsible for forks and spoons, walked gravely upstairs, and whispered to the General. That energetic warrior bristled into wrath at once. "Did *you* ask him, Lettie?" said he, pointing to where Mr. Dorimer was standing in a corner, watching a quadrille with the apparent interest of a man who has never seen anything of the kind before.

"Not I, dear; didn't *you*?" returned Mrs. Pike.

This was enough for the General, and he advanced to the attack forthwith.

"I think you have made a mistake, sir," said the old officer, working himself gradually up to boiling-point. "I think you have no business here. You've come without an invitation. You've taken an infernal liberty. In my time, sir, a man was kicked who did such things; and—and—you'll have the goodness to leave the house without another word."

Then the General looked daggers, feeling the while somewhat abashed by the perfect equanimity with which the other accepted his revilings.

"Am I not at Lady Boreall's?" said he, with an expression of intense and innocent surprise.

"No, sir, you are *not* at Lady Boreall's,"

"I think you have made a mistake, sir."

returned his host. "You are at Mrs. Pike's—Major-General Pike's. *I* am Major-General Pike!"

"Then, Major-General Pike, I shall to-morrow have the honour of enclosing you Lady Boreall's card of invitation, with my own. After that you will, I trust, see the propriety of withdrawing your offensive expressions, and will convey to Mrs. Pike my apologies for thus intruding on her party by mistake."

The man seemed quite cool and composed. His manner, if a little theatrical, was perfectly assured, and he neither raised nor lowered his voice, speaking in a calm, equable tone, like one who had done nothing to be ashamed of, and cared not a straw if all the world were there to hear. He had quite the best of the position, and the General felt himself in the wrong. Though irascible, Pike was the best-hearted of men.

"I beg your pardon," he exclaimed. "A thousand pardons. I spoke hastily. I was in a devil of a rage. All sorts of scamps might get into one's house, and I thought you were one of them. If you're a friend of Lady Boreall's, it is quite sufficient. As you are here, I hope you'll stay and amuse yourself. Mrs. Pike will be delighted to see you. Let me present you to her at once."

"To-morrow, after I have thoroughly satisfied you, General," replied the other, with a stately bow. "In the meantime I thank you for the intention, and I wish you good-night."

Then he marched downstairs with all the honours of war, followed by several pairs of eyes, and, amongst others, by those of young Perigord, who puzzled himself exceedingly to remember where he had heard that voice before.

We must return to Annie Dennison. After dancing with this young gentleman, she had con-

sented to accompany him to the supper-room, where she left him talking volubly to some officers in the Guards, and drinking more champagne than she considered good for his tender years. One or two remembered him at Eton, and "the Pieman," as they called him, was less exhilarated, perhaps, by the wine than by finding himself accepted on a footing of social equality with those magnificent young dandies, who were completely at home in Mrs. Pike's, as they were in every other ball-room, and, indeed, in society of all kinds, from a carpet-dance at St. John's Wood to the State Concerts of Her Majesty the Queen. Annie thought it was time for him to go to bed. She thought, also, that she had been a little unkind to Horace Maxwell. He was false, no doubt. Though he looked so unhappy to-night, it was impossible he could care for her, but still that was no reason she should be rude to him. It seemed unfeminine, unladylike; nay, in the house of a friend like Mrs. Pike, it was even inhospitable.

So she looked about through the different rooms, under pretence of seeking her hostess, and came upon him at last at an open window commanding the kitchen, offices, and stables, where he was cooling his face and contemplating the view with an air of disappointment and vexation amounting to disgust.

"Mr. Maxwell!"

He turned with a start. The girl knew he had been thinking of her; he tried to look so little astonished, and not the least pleased.

"You—you haven't seen Lettie, have you? I'm hunting for her everywhere."

"He had seen Mrs. Pike. She was in the tea-room. Should he go and fetch her?"

"Take me there, please," said Annie. "I shouldn't mind a cup of tea myself. I'm so tired.

It has been a good ball, hasn't it? But, somehow, every ball drags a little towards the end."

"I enjoyed it immensely!" he returned, with a weary look in his eyes that contradicted the assertion. "And so, I thought, did you. It only began to get flat, didn't it, half an hour ago?"

He had been watching her, then! How strange! How gratifying! She had not the heart to resent his implied impertinence, which she perfectly understood.

"I want you to do me a favour," she whispered, stopping at the door of the tea-room.

Horace, surprised rather than mollified, thought —"Hang it, you *are* a cool hand! I do believe you're going to tell me all about your marriage, and ask me to give you away!" But he answered with an outward composure so dignified as to be a little ridiculous—

"You have only to command me, Miss Dennison. I am wholly at your service."

"Thanks! I knew you would," said she, colouring. "Do you mind trying to get Mr. Perigord out of the supper-room? He's a nice gentlemanlike boy, but he's not used to London. I'm afraid he's a little over-excited, and—and—I shouldn't like him to get into a scrape here. You know I made Lettie ask him. Would it bore you very much to persuade him to go home?"

He could no more have refused than he could have struck her then and there, pale and tired, looking wistfully in his face; but he was sore, angry, hurt to the quick, and he answered sternly—

"You know I always obey your lightest wish. This is probably the last time you will ever ask me a favour—the last time I shall have the chance of doing anything on your behalf."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SLASHER

UT before Maxwell could interfere, Perigord had got himself out of the supper-room, and was intent only on identifying the stranger whose voice he heard in altercation—perhaps I should rather say, in explanation—with the General at the top of the stairs. Our young gentleman, excited by lights, wine, music, and, as he considered, unparalleled social success, felt his faculties sharpened, his energies aroused, and longed only for an adventure that should bring them all into play. Where had he heard that voice? Like an inspiration it flashed upon him. In spite of fair-haired wig, stoop, and spectacles, this was the man who had been hanging about Lexley's parsonage the day before his wife's disappearance, this was the man who had spoken to Mrs. Lexley at the gate when she left her home. With considerable presence of mind the youth pounced on Mr. Dorimer in the entrance-hall, now thronged with guests waiting for their carriages, and shook him frankly by the hand. Delancy—we may as well call him henceforth by his right name—seized the opportunity with characteristic promptitude,

pleased to show that he was known to one person, at least, in all that assemblage, and walked into the street arm-in-arm with his young friend at the moment Horace Maxwell came out of the supper-room, where he had been searching for the late Etonian, in obedience to Miss Dennison's commands.

He had brought no overcoat, his hat was under his arm; he gave chase without delay, determined to keep the young gentleman in sight and extricate him, if necessary, from the toils of a sharper, shrewdly suspecting this uninvited guest to be one of that fraternity for whose sustenance fools seem especially provided. He followed at a prudent distance, and smiled to observe with what a show of intimacy they walked together arm-in-arm.

"Will you smoke?" said Delancy, proffering a case full of large high-flavoured cigars. "No? Quite right. Bad habit for a young man. I've knocked about so much myself in all sorts of climates that I couldn't do without it. If you like to try one, you won't find these very strong."

Young Perigord, who, I am sorry to say, smoked a mixture of nigger-head and cavendish in private, resented the imputation of squeamishness by accepting what he was pleased to call a "roofer," and, after a dozen puffs, began to think his new friend not such a bad fellow after all, resolving the while to finish his adventure, as he would his cigar, to the bitter end.

"I knew you directly you came down," said he, "though you've a different kind of thatch on to-night, and you had no goggles when I saw you in the country. I say, we didn't think then we should ever meet at such a swell place as that," indicating by a backward jerk of his head the house they had left, from which the notes of harp and fiddle still

reached their ears, while shadows flitted across its window-blinds, bobbing up and down in harmony with the strains.

Delancy glanced sharply at him, wondering how much he would swallow.

"The fact is," he answered, "I'm obliged to go about in different disguises. I don't mind telling *you*. It's quite unnecessary in society like that we have just quitted, but my life would not be safe if I was recognised in the streets. I am here on a business of secret diplomacy, and I have had a hint that the Internationalists are looking after me. You know what that means!"

He drew his hand across his throat, and gathered from Perigord's interested face that he had not miscalculated his young friend's power of deglutition.

"You should have called at our place when you were in the neighbourhood," continued the latter, fishing, as it seemed, for further information. "Lexley is a capital fellow, and we could have shown you some good cricket. Besides, you know Mrs. Lexley, don't you?"

"I never make half-confidences," replied the other, turning his cigar thoughtfully between finger and thumb. "I am safe with you, but of course this is in strict confidence as between gentlemen. I do know Mrs. Lexley. I have known her a long time. The Reds threatened her too. It was to warn her I went down there. In a few weeks the danger will have blown over, but at present she is in hiding —close hiding. I do not even know where she is myself."

It was the only word of truth he had spoken in the whole interview, and the only one perhaps the other did not quite believe. Perigord pondered. The adventure, the disclosures, the man himself, all

were interesting to the last degree. He must see more before he parted with him of this mysterious individual, so calm, so undefeated, though he had just been virtually turned out of a ball-room, and wore a light wig with spectacles, because agents of the Red Republic were thirsting for his blood.

"I am deuced hungry!" exclaimed the young gentleman, throwing away the end of his cigar, and chinking two or three sovereigns in his waistcoat-pocket. "Can't we get some supper somewhere? I have lots of money. You call; I'll pay."

The other laughed. "I don't know London very well," said he, "but there used to be a place near here where one could get a lobster and a bottle of champagne at any hour of the day or night."

They had drifted, as it were, insensibly along Piccadilly, and had reached the neighbourhood of Leicester Square. Horace Maxwell, following with cautious steps, saw them turn into and out of a narrow street, cross an alley, and disappear through a door that swung open for all who desired to enter.

He determined to wait a few minutes before he presented himself, but remained at a short distance carefully on the watch. A policeman turned his bull's-eye on him, and continued his beat. Everything was orderly and quiet outside. Everything seemed equally well conducted within.

If Delancy, as his manner inferred, was a perfect stranger, the waiter deserved infinite credit for the rapidity with which he brought the champagne and shell-fish on a clean napkin-covered tray, even before these refreshments were ordered. The billiard-marker in the next room, too, must have had some intuitive sense that detected the arrival of a proficient in his favourite game, to exclaim triumphantly, "Here's a gent as will give it, Captain!"

And the person so denominated—an ill-favoured reprobate in yesterday's shirt-sleeves, ragged whiskers, and a profusion of Mosaic gold—must have been strangely wanting in confidence to withdraw so readily his offer of playing any man in the room for a sovereign who would allow him five in a game of fifty up; while two or three gentlemen of equally unprepossessing exterior winked at each other, no doubt from weakness of eyesight or the force of a bad habit.

From the table at which Delancy sat with his young acquaintance, the billiard-players could be seen through an open door passing to and fro in the enjoyment of that delightful pastime. Perigord, who drank a tumbler of vile champagne with a zest the elder man could not but admire, began to fidget in his chair long before the lobster was finished.

"Hang it! let's have a game," said he. "I don't know your form, but I'll play you even, and the loser shall pay for supper."

Now in a nature like Delancy's the predatory instincts are never dormant. He was a swindler, he was a sharper, a man of extraordinary cunning, shifts, and resources, but he was also a gambler to the backbone. He would play for hundreds if he could afford it, but was no less greedy for pounds, shillings, and even pence. He would have cheated a schoolboy out of his marbles no less eagerly than a duke out of his acres. All the rapacity of his character had been roused by the mere chink of two or three sovereigns in Perigord's waistcoat-pocket, and he could no more resist his longing to possess them than a hawk can help tearing the prey she has struck down.

But the hawk is unwilling to share with other hawks, and Delancy had no idea of allowing his

pigeon to be despoiled ever so little by birds of his own feather.

"Billiards," he observed, tapping thoughtfully on a lobster's claw. "It wouldn't be quite fair. Few men can give me odds at billiards. I had rather play some game of chance, if you won't allow me to consider you my guest. Something like heads and tails, odd and even. What do you say to beggar-my-neighbour?"

"Too childish!" exclaimed Perigord indignantly.

"Blind hookey; lansquenet; monté," continued the other. "No. All these require a certain number of players. I can think of nothing but écarté."

"I'll play you at écarté," said the lad, who considered himself exceedingly skilful in that game. "Play you for the price of our supper, and the winner shall stand brandy-and-soda for two. Here, waiter, bring a pack of cards."

"Hush," exclaimed Delancy. "This is not a club, and I daresay they would be puzzled to find such a thing in the house."

But while he spoke the waiter had put them on the table.

One of the unprepossessing gentlemen, peering through the door, nudged another unprepossessing gentleman, and laughed.

"The Slasher's still on the same lay," he whispered. "It's the old story. He has caught a green one to-night; green as grass."

"Green be hanged!" was the reply. "He's too simple by half. More likely a bonnet than a flat."

"You never know what the Slasher is up to," said the first speaker in a tone of admiration. "Now who's this chap? He looks like a real swell. This must be a pal of the Slasher's who stands in."

The last observation was elicited by the appearance of Horace Maxwell, who now walked in with perfect equanimity, ordered a brandy-and-soda, crossed over to the table at which the écarté players were seated, and while he studied Delancy's face, figure, and general appearance, narrowly watched the progress of the game.

The Slasher, as they called him, from the scar on his left hand, sat with his back against the wall. He had played écarté too often in doubtful company to permit the overlooking of his cards by a bystander. Horace, therefore, posted himself behind Perigord, who, wholly unconscious of his presence, continued his amusement, playing with fair average skill and that extraordinary luck which so often attends the gambling ventures of the young.

Delancy, frowned on by Fortune, had recourse to Art—a mistress who never fails her suitors, and who, though she must be wooed with untiring perseverance, won at last, is won for ever. At the third game, he dealt, and turned the king.

"Hold!" exclaimed Horace, in a loud voice that startled the billiard-players. "Stop the game. You're cheating, sir, and my friend shall *not* pay!"

Delancy, little moved by the familiar accusation, threw all the cards in a heap, to the middle of the table.

"Who the —— are you, sir?" said he. "And what do you want here?"

Perigord, recognising Maxwell and wondering how he got there, looked from one to the other, in helpless astonishment.

"Never mind who I am," returned Horace, buttoning up his coat for a row. "Who *you* are, is more to the purpose. You cheated. I'll swear. My friend shall not pay, as I said before, and the

sooner he comes out of this with me, the better for you and your confederates!"

"What do you mean by that, sir?" exclaimed the Captain, as he was called, swaggering into the room, with the other billiard-players. "You're no gentleman, you ain't! and—and—I'd knock your ugly head off for half a farthing."

The Captain was obviously considered the champion and bully of the party; but there might be detected a quaver in his voice, that belied the warlike tendency of his denunciations.

"Get your hat," said Maxwell to his young friend, whose name, however, he carefully abstained from pronouncing—"button up your pockets, and come with me. As for this gentleman in a dirty shirt," he added, turning fiercely on the Captain, who retreated a step, "if he wants to knock my head off, he had better try. Perhaps he will find it rather an unpleasant job."

"This low and vulgar abuse is nothing to the purpose," interposed Delancy, whose presence of mind had not the least forsaken him, and who spoke in the bland accents he had learned to consider as the tone of good society. "This is a matter it is impossible to overlook, but that cannot be settled to-night. You have made an accusation against me, sir, that no gentleman can submit to—as unjustifiable as it is impossible to substantiate. The affair cannot rest here, and you will, of course, furnish me with your name."

He turned to him while he spoke, with an air that almost caused Horace to disbelieve the evidence of his own senses, but for young Perigord, who, not deficient in mother-wit, had now gained time for reflection.

"There's something queer about this fellow," he

whispered; "the General kicked him out of his house not an hour ago, and he's got a wig on to look like somebody else!"

"Name!" repeated Horace, in high disdain. "You infernal scoundrel! If I did right, I should give you in charge at once to the policeman outside. He'll get you before long, I'll take my oath. Stand back, there, and let me pass! You *will* have it, will you? Take it, then!"

With that, straight from the shoulder, he gave the Captain one between the eyes, that cut his own knuckles to the bone, and dropped the bully where he stood. Running his arm through Perigord's, he hurried the boy downstairs, and in half a minute both were breathing freely in the street.

The Captain was in no hurry to get up. Pushed forward, though exceeding loth, by his backers, he had put himself into a posture of offence, little thinking his opponent would join battle so readily; and having felt the weight of that opponent's hand, he wisely lay still, so long as there was no chance of the punishment being repeated. It was not till the late visitor's footsteps died away that he lifted his head and began to stir. His friends applied a tumbler of brandy-and-water to his lips; he emptied it at a draught, sat on end, and looked about him. The marker burst out laughing, and the fallen man, rising to his feet with a sullen shake, addressed himself to Delancy.

"Slasher," said he, "you have not done good business to-night. It seems to me, we have had six to five the worst of it."

"*You* have," returned the other good-humouredly. "Nobody pitched into *me*. The young one staked and paid honourable! Three sovereigns isn't much, but it's better than a poke in

the eye with a sharp stick. This has been a fatiguing day. What say you, gentlemen? Let us shut up shop and make everything snug for the night. I'll stand a bowl of punch and cigars all round."

Such a proposal could not but meet with general assent. Even the Captain forgot his damaged beauty, and the party, drawing their chairs together, prepared to enjoy the small hours in the way that pleased them best.

"What on earth induced you to go to such a place as that?" was the first question Maxwell asked the lad, whom he still held by the arm, as they emerged on the open space of Leicester Square. "I never saw such a den of thieves in my life. Why, those fellows would have thought nothing of hocussing your liquor, turning your pockets inside out, and perhaps lending you a heave over one of the bridges, if they thought you would be troublesome when you came to yourself. You've had a squeak, young man; don't go so near the edge again!"

"I believe I have," answered the other, much delighted with the perilous nature of his late experience. "But I had often heard fellows talk of London night-houses, and I wanted to know what they were like. I never can resist a chance of seeing life."

"Of seeing death, you mean,' answered Horace. "I can't conceive a better chance of being robbed and murdered. It's lucky I came in when I did."

"You're a good fellow," answered Perigord, "and a deuced hard hitter for an eleven-stone man. He was just in distance, wasn't he? I never saw a fellow go down so plumb! But how long had you been there, and what made you come? I didn't know you were in the room till just before the row."

Horace explained how Miss Dennison had requested that he would keep an eye on her young friend, dwelling with unnecessary prolixity on the kindliness, good sense, and other angelic qualities of this incomparable young lady.

"When I saw you go away arm-in-arm with that awful snob," he concluded, "I thought you had taken leave of your senses, and it was time for your friends to interfere. However, it's all right now, though I think you must admit we are deuced well out of it."

"I have not half thanked you," replied the other. "I'm not good at thanking fellows; but I won't forget if I live to a hundred. I wonder if I shall ever be able to do something for you in return."

"Will you do what I ask you now?" said the other. "Let me take you to your own door, and promise me you will go straight to bed. Have you a latch-key?"

But the young gentleman had not got a latch-key, old Perigord holding that the possession of such an instrument might lead his son into bad company and many temptations; so a sleepy butler had to be aroused, who scanned his young master narrowly while he let him in, wondering, perhaps, that any free agent should go to bed so decently sober.

"Good-night, young one," said Maxwell, when they parted. "Mind you put your candle out. And, I say, don't go to any more of these night-houses—you mightn't get off so easily another time."

Then he jumped into a cab and drove to his own night-house, an exceedingly pleasant resort at no great distance from Pall Mall, where from midnight till about 2 A.M. he was sure to find kind looks, hearty greetings, pleasant acquaintances, and familiar friends.

CHAPTER XX

A NIGHT-HOUSE

THE resort Maxwell affected, though in many respects comfortable and even commodious, can bear no comparison in size and magnificence with those spacious clubs, which are nevertheless deserted for its attractions. On a hot night—and nights are sometimes very hot in St. James's Street towards the close of the London season—it disgorges its members so freely that these may be seen thronging the entrance, and even overflowing the narrow street into the thoroughfare it joins. Emerging from his cab, Horace found himself in the centre of a familiar group, who greeted him with less ceremony than welcome, lavishing no small measure of that sprightly conversation young people call chaff, while carrying lighted cigars in their mouths and beakers of cooling drinks in their hands.

"Why, here's Horace!" exclaimed the youngest of the party, a beardless champion belonging to the Household Brigade, with the frame of a child, the courage of a lion, and the audacity of a Queen's Counsel. "Horace—coat torn, hand tied up! having skedaddled, no doubt, from the fight, like his Roman namesake, and left his shield behind him, wisely but not well."

"What do you know about shields, you little

beggar?" was the reply. "I could cover the whole of your body with my flat hat."

"Flat hat, or hat belonging to a flat," retorted the other; "it might then protect some small allowance of brains, which it has never done yet. But a truce to this fooling, Horatius Flaccus. Stow your chaff, and give an account of yourself. If sober, tell us all about it. If drunk, go home, and go to bed."

"Don't bother," answered Maxwell. "There's no story to tell; and if there was, I couldn't speak till I have had a drink."

"Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will wink with mine," sang the tiny soldier, in an exceedingly sweet voice, putting his own beaker of gin-sling to the other's lips, who half emptied it at a draught. "Is it cooling? is it refreshing? Does it cut all the way down like a saw? Speak now, and stick to the unvarnished, man of brute force and ungovernable passions. You've been fighting like blazes, and you've been licked like fun."

"You'll be licked like fun yourself," answered Horace, laughing, "if you won't hold your tongue and give the others a chance. No, I did think I should have had to fight once to-night, only, fortunately for me, my man wouldn't stand up."

"Then you must have hit him when he was down!" said the other, pointing to stains of blood on the handkerchief Maxwell had bound round his hand. "Quite right, Horatius—safe, prudent, and effectual, if un-English. Thus, I am convinced, did your namesake keep the bridge so well

'In the brave days of old.'"

"Stop that noisy little beggar's mouth with a cigar, somebody," said a stout, good-natured-looking

man, joining the group. "Let's hear all about it, Horace. Did you drop into a general scrimmage, or what? Was it a rough-and-tumble, or a regular set-to?"

Maxwell had now got an audience in and about the porch, to whom, nothing loth, he detailed his night's adventure. Everybody likes to be the hero of the hour, and a man who tells his own story must be a bad narrator, if he cannot, at least, convey by implication, the fearlessness of his conduct and general nobility of his nature. I do not suppose Sinbad ever told his audience what a funk he was in when the Roc carried him high in air over the Valley of Diamonds, or allowed them to suppose he was in any way over-mastered by the Old Man of the Sea, and couldn't have kicked him off whenever he pleased! Nobody can see his own face except in a glass. Nobody can judge of his own character but as it is reflected in its effect on his neighbours. To gain the highest opinion of a man, it is only necessary to read his autobiography, and if my friends would think well of me, they have but to appraise me at the value I set upon myself.

So Horace, with many interruptions, detailed his own doings throughout the evening, touching on the incident that had disturbed the propriety of Mrs. Pike's ball.

When he arrived at the mention of that festivity, Percy Mortimer, cigar in mouth and tumbler in hand like the rest, joined the circle from within, as did also our friend Captain Nokes, on leave from Middleton, between returns. These gentlemen listened in profound silence — Percy, because he seemed a little out of spirits; Nokes, because no man acted more conscientiously up to the spirit of

that Eastern proverb, which declares "Speech is silver, but truly silence is gold!"

Not so the young Guardsman, who exclaimed, "Why, that's the chap we turned out of Hurlingham, who said he had been asked by the Peruvian Minister! A good-looking, bad-looking fellow, wasn't he—with dark hair and an eye like a hawk?"

"That's not *my* man," answered Horace. "I don't know what his eyes were like, for he wore spectacles, but he seemed to look pretty sharp out of them! And his hair was as light as yours. He might have been your elder brother, only he was twice as big, not half so noisy, and much better behaved."

"That's impossible!" returned the other. "You have now destroyed your last hold on our credulity. After such a statement nobody will believe another word!"

"When the General turned him out," continued Maxwell, "he never moved a muscle of his countenance; I thought then it was really a mistake. There was something of the Yankee, too, in his accent, and I made up my mind he was an American gentleman who had come to the wrong house. I am satisfied now that he is a sharper of the highest calibre."

"So am I," observed Percy Mortimer. "I'll tell you why afterwards. Go on."

Horace continued.

"Old Pike, who is as good a fellow as ever stepped, was quite deceived by the man's manner, and apologised freely; but a young fellow named Perigord, a capital boy not long from Eton, smelt a rat, and followed him out of the house, I suppose, to see that he didn't make away with the spoons."

"Bravo, Pieman!" interrupted the small soldier.

"Perigord was my fag — I taught him all he knows."

"I followed the young one, to see *he* didn't get into mischief," proceeded Horace, "and ran the couple to ground in a queer billiard-playing kind of place—No. 99½ Cheap Street, Haricot Lane. I had plenty of time to learn the address, for I waited outside ten minutes and more, considering the next move."

"Funking, no doubt," said his small tormentor. "Go on, Horace, the more you looked at it the less you liked it, I'll take my oath."

"I blundered on, at any rate," replied the other, "and found this young beggar, fresh from Eton, settled down to écarté. Écarté, if you please! with my friend in the spectacles! I need not say I watched him pretty closely, and he showed no inclination whatever to play on the square. It's an old joke enough, but I never saw a fellow pass the king so well. He did it while he sneezed, and I don't believe, though I was watching, I could have detected the action but for a scar on his left hand, that I couldn't keep my eyes off. A deuced ugly seam it was, from the knuckles right up to the wrist."

"That's the man!" muttered Percy Mortimer. "What fools the cleverest of these scoundrels are!"

Nokes, listening attentively, removed the cigar from his mouth and emitted a volume of smoke. Nothing more.

"When he marked the king it was *my* turn," continued Horace. "I told him he was a thief; and that brought his pals upon me. I told them they were all thieves, and I might as well have saved my breath, for they must have known it before. One chap tried to cut up rough, and butted

his stupid head against my knuckles. Hang him! he has taken all the skin off! There was a good deal of bad language, but not much of a scrimmage, and I brought my man out only three sovereigns the worse, gave him some good advice, saw him safe home, and came on here. This is a long story. Let us talk of something else. Nokes, my boy, how does the world go on at Middleton?"

But Captain Nokes, wrapped in profound silence, had disappeared from the circle, and was already bowling along Pall Mall in a cab, on his way to Scotland Yard.

"Let's walk home," said Percy Mortimer, running his arm through Maxwell's as they emerged in the fresh air; "I sent my brougham away when I came here. It's a fine night, or rather morning; and look here, old fellow, I've got something to say to you."

"Now for it," thought his friend, "he's engaged! —he's going to tell me so. Good-bye, Annie. Perhaps he'll ask me to be his best man."

But it is only justice to say that he resolved to bear the trial without wincing, and honestly from his heart to congratulate the man he liked, on winning from him the woman he loved.

Percy's manner, however, was anything but that of a successful suitor. It was impossible for one so sleek, composed, and self-contained, to look really disturbed, but he seemed about as much ruffled as does a well-groomed horse, when its coat stares in an east wind.

"I never thought that scoundrel would come to England again," he began; whereat Horace, with his thoughts fixed on Annie Dennison, started in surprise. "But your description is quite enough for me. The man who tried to rob young Perigord

to-night is a sharper I have known for years. I am ashamed to say he did me out of seven hundred pounds at a sitting by the very trick you detected so cleverly. I wasn't sure till you described his hand. Shall I tell you how he came by that scar? He was playing cards at San Francisco with a clean, close-shaved, sharp-featured man, who looked like a cross between a steeplechase jockey and a Methodist parson, but was really what was called 'a sportsman' in the States—a fellow who will play with and cheat you at any game you like to mention. Seeing it was a case of diamond cut diamond, with a heavy stake on, our friend had made up his mind to win, right or wrong. He had kept a card up his sleeve, which at the critical moment he concealed under his left hand, stretched carelessly on the table. The game went on, and his hand never moved from its place. Suddenly there rose a scream of pain, an oath, and a rush of all the company towards the players. Blood was spouting over the cards, and our friend's hand was nailed to the table by the blade of a bowie-knife, its haft still quivering from the force with which the steel had been driven through flesh and tendons and pasteboard, into the wood. 'If the ace of spades ain't sticking on my toothpick when you take it out,' said the sportsman, 'you shall do as much by me. If it is, you're a bloody cheat, you are! and it's no more than you deserve!' The ace of spades *was* transfixed by the bowie-knife, and everybody said the cruel, quiet, clean-shaved man had done right. Long before this I had dropped the swindler's acquaintance, but I could not leave him in a foreign town to die of lock-jaw, as seemed highly probable. I sent for a doctor, had him taken care of, and his wife nursed him patiently till he got well. Very soon after they

were separated. She was a handsome, resolute woman, to all appearance a thoroughbred lady. Why she ever married him, or how she could stand it so long as she did, often puzzled me exceedingly, for though I did not know her well, I could detect in every word and gesture that she belonged to quite a different class from her husband. The man's name was Delancy. Can you guess, Horace, who his wife is?"

"Not Miss Blair?—not Mrs Lexley?" exclaimed the other. "Good heavens, Percy! what a complication!"

"It *is* a complication," said Mortimer. "I had always understood the scoundrel was dead, and Mrs. Delancy free to marry again. Poor Lexley! he seemed foolishly fond of her. What a sword is hanging over his head!"

"She has left him," answered Horace, "and I suppose nobody in the world was ever so terribly cut up. I hear he's been almost out of his mind."

"Left him?" repeated Percy; "not to go back to this fellow?"

"I don't know," replied the other, loth to betray the confidence Laura had reposed in him, but desiring above all things to ask his friend's advice. "Don't you think one ought to find out? Don't you think one ought to tell Lexley? He's a dear friend, I can't bear to think he is so miserable. I am at my wits' end. What would you advise?"

Percy wondered for a few seconds, looking very grave and wise in the grey light of the summer morning, then he shook his head and delivered the following opinion:—

"I should wait. When in doubt what to do, he is a wise man who does nothing. In the moral as in the material world the negative force is strongest of

all. Dead weight must win in the long-run. Where a woman is concerned, as in the present case, nothing is really to be trusted but the chapter of accidents. So much the more reason for waiting, as old Dennison says, to see what turns up. The sex won't bear hurrying, I've always said so, and yet I believe I upset the apple-cart to-night solely by furious driving. Horace, I've something to tell you. Hang it! I wouldn't tell it to any fellow in the world but *you*!"

"Out with it, old man!" said Maxwell, while his cheek turned a shade paler in the morning light.

"You and I have each been in a scrimmage since dinner," was the metaphor in which Mr. Mortimer thought well to convey his confidence. "You've given a facer, and I've had one. Do I look as if I had been knocked down? I feel like it. Will you believe it, Horace, I proposed to a woman not three hours ago and she refused me!"

"Refused you!" Horace could not have added a word to save his life.

"Asked her in so many words to be my wife, and she said 'No,' as plain as I am speaking now. It's a deuced odd thing, unaccountable, and all that, but there's no mistake about it. I will do Miss Dennison the justice to say I think she knows her own mind."

So heavy was the weight taken off his heart that Horace felt as if he must fly up into the air. Loyal to the last, however, he made shift to stammer out—

"I'm sorry for you, old fellow, at any rate; but won't you try again?"

Mortimer shook his head. "Never allow a woman another shot," said he. "She mightn't miss with the second barrel. I believe the girl is quite right. She had *my* interest at heart, and perhaps I'm better off as I am."

CHAPTER XXI

MIDDLETON GAOL

GLOOMY as must have been the "dungeon dark" of a feudal castle in the Middle Ages, such as that in which William of Deloraine complained he lingered "long months three," filthy as the miry hole from which a pitying eunuch drew the prophet out by his arm-pits with clouts and cords, I can conceive nothing more suggestive of utter hopelessness and desolation than the order, the discipline, the whitewash, the blank bare vacuity of an English prison. No merciful obscurity veils its stern, ruthless calm, no speck nor stain relieves its bright, blinding monotony of cleanliness; the bird of the air lights not within its precincts, and the very insect, in unconscious zest of life, seems instinctively to shun the living tomb we call a gaol.

The regularity of its work, its sleep, its meals, as hour after hour drags on in slow, unvarying routine, with the same fare, the same gaoler, the same chaplain, to appear and disappear at the same stated periods, the utter absence of hope, fear, excitement, amusement, all the interests that stir the human mind, produce a deadening effect on the brain, similar to that which numbs the body in a general stagnation of the blood.

Add to this the stupefying result of silence, unbroken from week's end to week's end, and

imagine, if you can, the state of an uneducated intellect subject to such a process, of a turbulent disposition reduced to so profound and exasperating a calm. Were it not for the sense of constant supervision, which to the prisoner is as his conscience to the free agent, there is no saying to what depths of depravity those might sink of whose expiation to society we read carelessly in the newspapers as "committed by the worthy magistrate for so many months of solitary confinement with hard labour."

The criminal is punished in order to deter others from crime. It would be well if before the eyes of every man who is tempted to sin against his brother, could pass a scene like that which I shall attempt to describe, as enacted in a grim and impregnable modern fortress, called Middleton Gaol.

It is an hour after noon, on a dull day in the dead of winter. The sky, or that patch of it which can be seen from the prison-yard, wears a gloomy, lowering, I might almost say, *sulky* aspect, such as denotes a black frost. There lies a wide sheet of water, called Middleton Mere, not half a mile from the town, and wild-fowl that have flown inland from the coast are dipping and paddling and pruning their feathers along its edge. The flap and splash of their wings, the continuous babble of their call can be heard within the gaol.

An old willow-tree has stood for years without the building, its pliant branches shooting above that smooth, solid masonry. A gust of the keen north wind strips off its last few shrivelled leaves. One of these drops noiselessly into the prison, where it flits like a living thing from corner to corner, leaping and falling, and whirling round and round, as if in frantic efforts to escape.

Little children can be heard at play outside.

Shrill voices break the monotonous tramp of some eight or ten prisoners taking their enforced allowance of air and exercise in one of the stone-paved courts. They keep step like a squad of soldiers, but sullenly, like soldiers ripe for mutiny, and seldom raise their eyes from the square level flags, each so like the other, at their feet, unless it be to steal a glance at the warder on duty—a stout, imperturbable person, whose lot, but that he accepts it of his own free will, seems little more enviable than their own.

Twelve hours out of the twenty-four he shares their unbroken silence, their irksome confinement—all but their labour and their meals. For twelve hours out of the twenty-four, his eye must be on the watch, his attention on the stretch. He is locked in as they are, he is defenceless as they are, wears no steel at his belt, carries no revolver in his hand, but he wields that moral force which is so potent in the world outside, which loses none of its dead, unvarying, irresistible pressure in a gaol. He has been sitting since daybreak in a box like a pulpit, overlooking some twenty cells of the ward under his especial charge. Mirrors skilfully adjusted, enable him to detect every look and action of his prisoners, as each remains in his own separate compartment, leaving it only when the click that produces his number warns him it is time to take his turn on the treadmill. Even there he holds no communication with his neighbour, and never sees his face. Twin brothers might occupy adjoining cells for years without recognising each other by a glance, a whisper, or a sign. It is hardly possible for one who has not tried the experiment to conceive how a man loses his own identity when he becomes a numeral. No. 100 begins to wonder if he ever *was* John Smith, if he ever did lay Mrs. John

Smith's head open with a fire-shovel, or squander in gin and profligacy the wages that should have found the little Smiths in bread. The warder knows him as No. 100. He knows himself as No. 100. After a while his knowledge of things in general seems dwindled down to these two facts.

Mutiny is thus checked by rendering combination impossible; and the warder, relieving his weariness only by the change from a sitting to a standing posture, is as safe with his charge and quite as despotic as the captain of a man-of-war on his own quarter-deck.

It is not surprising that under such conditions vigilance may sometimes relax—attention wander, for a minute at a time.

Round and round the prison-yard falls the dull tramp of footsteps in that weary, sullen march; the gates are locked, the walls are smooth and high. Twenty yards off are fresh-turned mould, wet grass, bushes, freedom, and an uninterrupted view for miles. Twenty yards off are joy, liberty, paradise —for a bird of the air; but for no creature without wings. The court, between a whitewashed building, wherein cooking is done, and the outer wall, may be some fourteen feet wide. The wall itself is at least equally high, but considerably overtopped by the cooking-house, on the sloping roof of which certain repairs, entailing the necessity of a slight scaffolding, are in process of completion. A deperate running leap taken from the edge of that roof might land a desperate man on the coping of the outer wall. Once there, if he dared drop fully four times his own height, he would find himself outside the prison.

No. 99 has calculated the chance day and night ever since that scaffolding was raised. No. 99 gives

no trouble. He has been a model convict from the time he came in, was perfectly clean in his person when subjected to the preliminary wash, and neither scowled nor blasphemed when they cut his hair. He has learned the routine of the gaol with unusual quickness and docility, eats his prison fare with a good appetite and a thankful smile, and raises his eyes frankly, though respectfully, to the warder's face, thereby winning golden opinions of that official, very weary of the downcast, sidelong glances to which he is accustomed. No. 99, he thinks, must intend to earn by good behaviour certain authorised indulgences, a certain increase of liberty, during his imprisonment; for as there are gradations of temperature in the Turkish bath, and, if we believe the poets, in a hotter place still, so there are degrees of confinement, even in the captivity of a gaol.

But it is noteworthy that the governor, a grim old veteran, who for many years of his life has been gaining experience of humanity in its very worst type, a man without a fancy or a prejudice, on whom it is hopeless to impose, has placed a private mark of his own in the prison-books against the entry that records the admission and verifies the identity of No. 99.

The squad of prisoners nearly complete a circle, as they pace round the warder standing in their centre. His back is therefore turned to each in rotation, it is also turned to the cooking-house and the scaffolding, consisting of two upright poles and one transverse bar, that has not yet been taken down. No. 99 glances stealthily upwards each time he passes the woodwork, and his eye grows brighter with every glance. Now and again he moistens his palms furtively with his tongue, opening

his shoulders and loosening his joints like an acrobat preparing for a feat.

There is a wild-beast show to-day in Middleton. Four-footed convicts, whose imprisonment is lightened by the admiration of mankind, are rubbing against the bars of their cages in the market-place to the deep bass notes of a gong, sounded by a red-faced man in velveteen, and confidently accepted by the townspeople for the lion's roar. Every now and then a flourish of trumpets and the roll of a drum deaden all other noises, penetrating even to the prison court. One of these bursts arrests the warder's attention; he puts his hand to his ear and listens with head aslant. The man was a soldier long ago. As the music swells louder and louder he is a soldier again, marching down into the trenches to defy the Russian guns; before him lies Sebastopol, with its calm sea, its stone quays, its white buildings, its ships at anchor, and the blue Crimean sky above all—for one moment and no more.

In that moment No. 99 has sprung at the scaffolding like a wild cat, swarmed up the nearest pole, and reached the roof of the cooking-house. His figure, running along the slates, comes out clear and sharp against the grey sky.

The convicts themselves seem helpless for amazement. The spirit of insubordination would catch like wild-fire, but there is no one to assume the lead, and they look blankly in each other's faces, none daring to set the example or propose mobbing the warder to death where he stands. Instinctively, however, they help their comrade all they can by crowding, coughing, scuffling with their feet and grouping themselves about the spot from whence he took his spring.

The warder is the first to break the rule of

silence. "Hold on, man! By the Lord you'll be killed!" he exclaims, as No. 99, running wildly down the slanting slated roof, clears the court below in one frantic leap that lands him on the coping of the prison wall—hands, knees, feet, and face all together—doubled up like a ball.

One instant he poises on the outer edge, bare, smooth, and slippery, then rolls off into freedom, with a fall of more than twenty feet.

The warder has already recovered his astonishment. The prisoners are promptly ordered back into their cells. The alarm is given. The escape reported to the governor, and a pursuit organised without delay. The chase, if exciting, is soon over. Amongst the scrub and rubbish that fringe the foundations of the prison wall, limp and motionless lies a bundle of convict's grey, that looks at first sight to be a mere heap of cast-off clothes. It represents No. 99, nevertheless, and is carried off to the gaol infirmary, where it is visited forthwith by the surgeon, who pronounces the case dangerous and likely to prove fatal, recording it methodically on a fresh-ruled page, in the following entry:—

"No. 99. Compound fracture of arm and thigh-bones; fracture of clavicle; lesion of pectoral muscles; concussion of the spine."

This is why Lexley walks into Middleton faster than usual, with an air of energy and vitality that he has not worn since the fatal day when his wife left her home.

It was bright summer weather then; it is the depth of winter now. The intervening time has been, with the clergyman, one constant fight against the powers of evil; against those busy fiends who

have never ceased to haunt the heart without a hope, since they whispered the blasphemy in Job's ear that bade him "Curse God and die."

They have plied Lexley with all their craft and all their weapons, attacking him in company, in solitude, under the poor man's roof, by the sick man's bed, in the pulpit, the reading-desk, at the very altar itself, till the brave spirit quailed, the strong frame trembled, and poor vexed humanity could but cry aloud to Heaven from the depth of its despair. Then came down help, solace, respite, if not from sorrow, at least from agony of pain, vouchsafed in no celestial vision, in no miraculous interposition, but in the daily round of common tasks and common duties, in the plodding journey along the lowly path; in the kindly word, offering comfort to another; the noble action, careless and regardless of self; in the cup of cold water, bestowed from the holiest of all motives; in the love that, loving its brother whom it *did* see, offered its Father whom it did *not* see, that acceptable tribute which, even here on earth, is never without reward.

Yet the struggle was hard, and left its traces deeply scored on the features and bearing of the man. He had grown very gaunt and pale; the black whiskers were already streaked with grey, and Algernon Lexley, in the first prime of manhood, looked like one whose task was already more than half done. I have seen a few such faces on earth among benefactors of their kind, among martyrs of science, among religious orders, among pious enthusiasts, to whose piety the scoffer could only object that it was too much tinged with self-sacrifice and asceticism. If indeed the disembodied spirit preserves any resemblance to the covering it

wore in life, I cannot but think that many such faces will be seen in heaven.

Greater intellects have been destroyed by a less sorrow than that which turned the brightness of Lexley's life into utter darkness; its sweetness into wormwood and gall. He prayed that only he might not go mad, and his prayer was granted. It took time before he could understand and appreciate the full extent of his calamity. He searched, he pondered, he made inquiries, cautiously indeed, and with exceeding care not to compromise her fair name, whose image, in spite of all, he still treasured in his heart of hearts; but when search, surmise, and inquiries produced no result, he forced himself to accept the inevitable and look his affliction in the face. He could but arrive at one conclusion. She had left him for another! voluntarily, as appeared from her letter, and with so much of remorse as seemed natural in a woman of strong passions, not entirely without a sense of right and wrong.

Stinging, maddening, as was that reflection—scorn, anger, jealousy were yet dashed with something softer and sadder than resentment.

The shame of it, like Othello's, was hard to bear, but there was also "The pity of it, Iago!"

The love that has become part of a man can no more be drained out of his system than the marrow can be sucked from his bones. Of all his trials the cruellest was to dream that she came back to him, and laid her fair head upon his breast—and he forgave her.

Athletic training has been sneered at, muscular Christianity derided, the old vexed question, whether the Greeks were right when they taught their young men boxing and music, argued over and over again; but I think there can be no question that he who

has learned to gain a mastery over the body has gone a long way towards gaining a mastery over the mind. The advantage of training consists far less in the physical strength it develops than in the mental power it denotes. The being trained is a mere result; the being able to train is a mighty motive cause. The musician must possess an ear, the boxer a biceps, or the whole Greek system becomes as patent a fallacy as any circular, never-ending, impossible syllogism of the Porch; but granted ear and muscle, the habit of refining the one and toughening the other is the habit of conquering difficulties by a scientific application of graduated exertion.

Lexley had gone into training at College for many a feat of strength and endurance; the principles that had invigorated his body he now brought to bear upon his mind.

His nature had given him energy, his religion taught him unselfishness; when the first agony of sorrow was overcome, he argued something in this way:—

"I am not put into the world for the indulgence of my own passions, either in pleasure or in pain. I have no more right to withdraw from my fellow-creatures to mourn than to feast. Here is my place—here is my work. The place must be filled—the work must be done; weak, prostrate, mangled as I am, how can I make myself fit for the task? Only by constant care, unceasing effort, vigilance unrelaxed. I must work and pray. Pray that I may be strong enough to work, work that I may be composed enough to pray. Oh! if I were not a responsible being, that I might lie down and rest! But I *am* a responsible being, and my rest, if indeed I can ever rest again, is only to be earned through severe and

unremitting toil. Welcome then labour! however hard, however harassing, however painful, let it but be in my Master's vineyard! and when night comes, for every man to receive his penny, 'home to go and take his wages,' who so glad to be released as I!"

Then he sketched out for himself a plan of occupation that left him not a moment unemployed. Leisure meant memory, and memory was simply torment.

There was much to do in his parish, but not half enough for *him*. To the neighbouring clergymen he proffered his assistance, taking their marriages, baptisms, and burials, and on Sundays a service and sermon in addition to his own two. Lest all this should be insufficient, he had now accepted the duty of the gaol chaplain—a pale hectic young man, to whom at this season he could show no greater kindness than a transfer that enabled him to leave Middleton for the soft sea-breezes of the Channel Islands.

The governor took greatly to this new visitor. There was something in his silence, his gravity, the simple earnestness of his demeanour, that pleased an old soldier, himself a man of few words, and those more remarkable for accuracy than polish. "The new parson looks like business," he said; and "to look like business," in the governor's opinion, summed up all the most admirable qualities of man. Though he could not induce Lexley to dine with him, nor even to drink a glass of sherry in the middle of the day, he received him with a stern, suppressed cordiality when he arrived, and looked after him with a grim smile of approval when he went away.

It was in consequence of a note from this worthy that Lexley walked so swiftly into Middleton,

looking like a man who saw his duty laid out before him, and would do it to the uttermost. The governor's communication was characteristically simple and laconic. It consisted of two lines :—

"MIDDLETON GAOL, MIDDLETON.

"REVEREND SIR, — Please attend infirmary, as soon as possible. Bad case. Surgeon's report 'Hopeless.' Out of *his* hands now, and in *yours*.

"(Signed) JOHN STRONG, *Governor*."

When Lexley entered the prison he found his correspondent waiting at the door of his private room outside the gate.

"Am I too late?" asked the parson, who had calculated he could save time by starting at once, and trusting to his own pedestrian powers rather than wait while a horse was got ready.

"No," answered the governor. "Man will live till night. Come in, and warm yourself."

"I'll go and see the poor fellow first," said Lexley. "There is not a moment to lose."

"*Must* wait till Blades leaves him," was the reply. "Come in."

So Lexley entered, and took a seat by the fire in a cheerless apartment, uncurtained, uncarpeted, something between an orderly-room, a surgery, and a counting-house.

"Glass of sherry? No! Then I will. Here's your health, sir. When did you get my note?"

"Three-quarters of an hour ago," answered the clergyman, looking at his watch.

"And it's four miles. "Good walking!" observed the governor, with an air of approval. Then he emptied his glass, locked up the bottle, and said no more.

Lexley's thoughts were beginning to travel—back—back—always back to the point at which he dared not let them dwell. He broke the silence with a question.

"Can you tell me anything about this poor fellow, Mr. Strong? His age, his moral character, the crime that brought him here?"

For answer the governor opened a book that looked like a ledger, and indicating a particular column with his finger, pushed it over the table for Lexley to read. The information imparted seemed scanty enough, but the clergyman's curiosity was excited by a cross in red ink, on the margin opposite the convict's number, and he asked what it meant.

Strong winked solemnly. "That's my mark," said he. "You'll find six like it in those three volumes, and no more. I'll take care never to put them seven into the same ward."

"Does it mean they are dangerous?" asked Lexley in some surprise.

"It means they're artful," answered the governor. "It means they can communicate with each other in ways of their own. It means they could lay their heads together to burn us out if they had a mind. I kept the books of Southgate Prison on that system for thirteen years, and never so much as a mess-kid damaged. Then they moved me here, and appointed that man from the Artillery. He neglected my precautions, and what was the upshot? An outbreak. A mutiny. Two warders injured and one disabled for life. Prevention is better than cure."

It was a long speech for the governor. The clergyman reflected how he could best awake the dying convict to a sense of his situation while he listened.

"Then this is one of the worst characters you have got?" said he, rather as it seemed in answer to his own thoughts than with a desire for information.

"Bad as *can* be!" replied the other. "But he'll not be here long. One of your half-gentlemen, this is. They always want most looking after. It's not a common prisoner that tries to break out of such a place as ours. And he did get out, too. Well, he's finished his time now. It is to be hoped he will be conscious enough to see you, sir. Here's Blades. Come in, Mr. Blades. I expect it's no use."

CHAPTER XXII

DISCHARGED

BLADES was a rough and ready, hard-featured personage, with the resolute eye, yet good-humoured expression we so often observe in surgeons and seafaring men. Each profession is always, so to speak, before an enemy. Emergencies arise at any moment to test their utmost nerve, and call forth all their ingenuity. It would have been impossible to discover from his countenance the opinion Mr. Blades entertained on the case he had recently left, but he walked to the fire, warmed his hands, and shook his head.

"How long d'ye give him?" asked the governor.

"Impossible to say," was the professional answer. "Man is quite conscious. That is the worst sign of all. He *may* live till to-morrow morning. The organs are healthy, and the vital powers unusually strong. At the same time, if Mr. Lexley is to see him, I think it would be well to put off no more time."

Then the doctor bowed to the clergyman, and the clergyman to the doctor, with something of the formal respect paid to each other by the seconds in a duel.

"Is there any danger from agitation?" asked Lexley, as the surgeon led the way through cold whitewashed passages, to the cold whitewashed apartment where his patient lay. "My duty is imperative, but when the hour-glass has so nearly run out, we must be careful how we shake the sands. While there is life there is hope."

"Excuse me, Mr. Lexley," answered Blades. "My business is with the life, yours with the hope. I should be sorry to think that in this case there was as little margin for the one as the other."

"He is doomed, then?" said Lexley. "God help him!—so soon to depart—so short a time to prepare. I say, God help him!" He raised his hat reverently, and the surgeon looked shrewdly at him from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Amen!" assented the latter. "*We* can't. You need have no scruple in doing your duty, Mr. Lexley, lest it should interfere with mine. The man is sinking hour by hour. I should say he will be gone by sun-down. Certainly before to-morrow morning—*where*, you know better than I do. Good-day. My assistant is within call. Either of us can be with you at a moment's notice."

He opened a door while he spoke, and Lexley found himself standing by the death-bed of No. 99.

Supine, motionless, swathed in bandages as if he had already become a corpse, there was yet in the convict's eye a sparkle of light and recognition, that seemed strangely at variance with the warped sunken features, the pale drawn face, from which life was ebbing fast. His voice, too, was strong, and though he lay stretched out so helplessly, a certain contraction of the muscles denoted that he would have risen to greet his visitor if he could.

"Thank you, sir," said he. "I expected you'd

come. I don't think much of your sort in a general way, and I've said to myself many a time lately, 'He's too good for the trade.' I know *you*, Mr. Lexley, though you don't know *me*."

"My poor fellow," replied the clergyman, "it's not me we are here to talk about, it's yourself. You are going a long journey, my man, though it will soon be over; and you're going to a happy home, if you will but think so, and ask to be taken in."

No. 99 laughed feebly, and tried to shake his bandaged head.

"No doubt of the journey," said he, "but what sort of a welcome I am to get at the end is more than you or I or anybody else can tell. At any rate, it will do me no harm to speak the truth, and I guess it will do you good. Mr. Lexley, I never saw you but once till you came here, and then you didn't see me. I took good care of that. The first Sunday you preached to us in chapel you were so changed I could hardly believe it was the same man. I said to myself, 'He's terribly cut down; but he's a good one; he's got grit in him; he's the sort that fights on their backs same as on their legs. He doesn't care a cent for himself; he thinks more of us poor chaps than of his own sorrows, his own injuries, and if ever I can undo the harm I've done him I will.' Some men take on about a woman, Mr. Lexley, and some don't care. It's my nature not to care. She wasn't such a bad wife to *me*, though she did sometimes get her back up uncommon, and that was fatal in our line of business, fatal! But she had a grand appearance, and walked into a room like a duchess. If I had been born a duke, I wonder whether I should have been a scoundrel just the same?

"I wasn't hasty with her, neither. I've nothing to reproach myself with; the thing couldn't go on

when she flew out like a fury at every fresh plant, and refused to take her share in the work that earned our daily bread. I wouldn't have left her without money, if I'd had a dollar to spare. It wasn't my fault. I never owed her a grudge, and she tried my temper often. I *should* like to see her again, somehow, just to make friends, you know, and say good-bye; but I don't suppose I ever shall, if what you parsons say is true. Never too late? Isn't it? Then it's very different there from here. Now it's a queer thing, Mr. Lexley; you're a better scholar than me, though I could construe my Horace once—and perhaps you'll explain it, but though I've got to cross almost directly, and haven't a notion how I'll ever reach the shore, I'm thinking much less of the future than the past—don't interrupt me, sir. You're a good man—pray for me if you like, till you're black in the face, if it's any use. I need it more than most; but till I have made a clean breast I can't pray for myself, and I wouldn't if I could.

"She didn't care for me, not the turn of a card. I never was the sort for her to fancy, not from the first. Why, I've seen women married to bigger scamps than me, that fond of them they'd follow round like dogs, and think the master couldn't do wrong. It didn't make me better, you may be sure, but it wasn't her fault, I suppose.

"Well, when I heard she had got a real good berth at last I didn't grudge it, not a bit; but it seemed only fair, didn't it? that I should have my share, especially as I hadn't struck luck at any one game on the board since I came home."

His accents had grown fainter, from the exertion of talking. Lexley thought he was wandering, and waited patiently for occasion to bring him back to a

sense of his condition, and rouse him to the necessity of repentance. The clergyman, true to the instincts of his profession, only feared that the mind might not be awakened till the body slept—that the words of eternal life might be lost in the bewildering struggle of death.

He was mistaken in his estimate of the dying man's state. No. 99 seemed to regain strength with the pause of a few moments; his voice was firm and clear, while he resumed—

"You remember what she was, Mr. Lexley. Resolute, headstrong, not to be persuaded, not to be controlled. She gave *you* the slip, and she gave *me* the slip. I've never heard a word about her from that day to this. You know me, surely; there's not much time for talking now. My name is Delancy, Mr. Lexley, and the woman you married is my wife!"

The clergyman sprang to his feet as if he had been shot; the blood rushed to his brain, his head swam, his eyes rolled, the room reeled round him, and he gasped, with his hand to his throat, like a man in a fit. Never in all that he had gone through was the strain so great on his courage, his endurance, his noblest qualities, both of body and mind. But for the healthful physical organisation he had taken care to preserve in full vigour, that in the greatest emergency he might be master of himself, Lexley must have fairly lost his head, and failed to sustain the calm dignity of a clergyman, the firm bearing of a man.

In a minute he had recovered himself; in a minute he had taken in the whole position. His great difficulty was to keep down the delirious rush of joy that seemed flooding his brain, to abstract his mind from the maddening consideration, that she

might be innocent after all—the victim, like himself, of a cruel misconception, and that hereafter, in God's good time, they could come together without sin again.

Delancy eyed him with a pitying, half-remorseful look that had in it a certain sense of the ludicrous.

"Do you forgive me, sir?" said he. "I wasn't the only one to blame after all. She thought I was dead—no wonder. Glad of it too, no doubt. Why wasn't I one of those poor fellows that were made to walk the plank? It's all the same now; and I can't understand why I got off instead of my mate, when I gave him up my berth. There wasn't much to choose between us. These are the things that puzzle a fellow like me. Perhaps I might be a shade better than him, and so I got another chance. It hasn't been much to boast of. I had a queer card to play yesterday, but I played it well! I wish you'd been there, sir, to see what a flyer I came across the court. Guess I frightened old Bogie the warder into next week. They'll talk of the Convict's Leap, I expect, long after the convict's been hove over the side once for all. I wish I had died at sea. Somehow it seems so much fresher and freer to be sewn into a hammock and go down with a plunge in blue water. It's no use thinking about that now. I can't lift my hand to shake yours, if I would, Mr. Lexley, but say you forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive," answered the other. "If I had, do you think I could bear a grudge at a moment like this?"

"Well, I spoiled your home for you," resumed Delancy, "when I came loafing round to see what I could get. I ought to have known my girl's spirit, and that if she said she'd beat me, why, beat me she would, though she broke her own heart and yours

too to win the game. I wish I had kept away, Mr. Lexley, now I know what you are."

"No! no!" exclaimed the clergyman, answering perhaps his own thoughts, rather than the words of the dying man. "It was the hand of Providence—I see it all now. Surely, where there is no intention of evil there can be no sin. She saved herself, and she saved me. God bless her! As for you, my good friend, pray to God that He may forgive you as you forgive others. Think. Is there anyone to whom you bear ill-will?"

Delancy looked up, and an evil scowl passed over his wan, death-like face. "Yes," he said; "that murdering skunk who nailed my hand on the table, down to 'Frisco. The coward! My *Derringer* was under the chair, and he knew I couldn't reach it. Ah! It makes a fellow want to live when he thinks about clearing off a few such old scores. And if they had but built the wall five feet lower I might have been a free man now, without a scratch! I'd learned a plan of the place long before I came in. I had a map of the country for twelve miles round in my head. I could have reached that water they call Middleton Mere in three minutes. It would have taken four at least to unlock the wards and give the alarm. I could have stayed up to my neck in mud, if necessary, till dark, and you're not to suppose I was such a fool as to come in here without securing a friend in the town who would have found me some clothes and a railway ticket! Why, the thing was as good as done, only I missed my footing when I reached the coping and rolled off. No, Mr. Lexley, I'd forgive the villain that set a mark on me, if I could, but I can't.

"Look here, sir. There was a silent chap, a dragoon officer he was, in this very town—half

simple, I thought him. I ought to have known better. How he tracked me I can't rightly tell you, but he set the police on and showed them the way himself. It all came out on the trial; we were sitting quietly over our glass, me and some friends of mine, thinking no harm, when he came in with a sergeant. 'That's the man!' says he; 'I'll swear to him anywhere by the scar on his left hand!' I needn't say, sir, when once they had me safe it was only a question what they'd try me for. I've done more business, and done it better, than any other man in the trade. I mayn't be cleverer than my neighbours, but I was always industrious. I couldn't bear to be idle. Why, if they'd let me out now, I know where there's money to be got that would make me free of the profession for life. What's the use of talking? I shall never leave this bed till I'm carried to my grave—within the prison bounds, too—that's what riles me most. I *should* like to have died the other side of the wall. Why didn't I break my neck when I broke nearly every bone in my body? There *is* a providence, I do believe, in these things. Perhaps you'll be the gainer. And after all, what's the odds? The game is played out, and no more cards left to call a fresh deal. I'm tired, Mr. Lexley. I could sleep, I think, now the pain has worn off a bit. Don't leave me, sir. I'm the worst enemy you ever had, and it does me good to see you looking kindly down into my face as if I'd been your brother. I can believe *you*! I say, is it true, Mr. Lexley, about heaven, and hell, and all that?"

Of many victories attained by the clergyman over self, this was the crowning triumph, wrested from the deathbed of a hardened sinner, whose time for repentance had become a question, not of hours,

but of minutes. While the disclosure lately filled his whole being with a rapture not to be imagined but by those who have gone through like tortures, to be delivered in a like manner, he could yet coerce his energies to the task before him, could force his mind to concentrate all its powers on the duty of saving a fellow-creature's soul.

By that humble prison bed, in that bare prison chamber, was fought once again the great fight between the powers of good and evil, that has raged from all time, since his rebellion who was called the Son of the Morning; raged with diabolical perseverance and ingenuity on the one side, with boundless faith and simple constancy on the other. And who shall say that in this, or in any like conflict, the powers of darkness were permitted to prevail?

When the clergyman ceded his place to the doctor, there was a calm smile on Delancy's face. When the latter left his patient a few minutes later, because all was over, the mother that bore him might have recognised in those serene and placid features the innocent lineaments of her child.

"He's made a better job of his day's work than I have of mine," said Blades to his assistant, when they met in the surgery. "Is it because he's a better hand, think you, or only that his is theory and mine practice?"

The assistant, a well-brought-up young man, muttered something about repentance and the consolations of the Church; but Blades, whose opinions were of the most speculative and audacious, was not to be so put off.

"Either there's something in it or there isn't," he said. "A doctor can do very little for the body; I should like to know how much a parson can do for the soul. When such a man as Lexley believes

he can lend a helping hand to such an incurable scoundrel as No. 99 after you and I have given him up, the matter becomes worth studying, if it's only as a question of curiosity. That the parson is a good man I'm as sure as I am that when the vital organs cease to act life becomes extinct. I wish we could find out exactly why we don't progress, young man. I sometimes think Galen and Paracelsus knew as much as the College of Surgeons, and Socrates more than the whole bench of bishops."

"It was a desperate leap, sir," said the other, glad to take refuge in the familiar regions of fact. "You know the width of the prison-yard, and the height he must have fallen had he missed his aim. It is wonderful to think he could venture."

"Healthy organs, fine muscular development, and admirable nervous system," replied his senior. "The scoundrel had plenty of pluck; I saw that the moment they brought him in. He deserved to get away. We should have lost an excellent subject if he had. I should like to have pulled him through, I own, but failing that, I think I shall like to dissect him almost as well!"

Leaving the gaol in the early winter twilight, Mr. Lexley seemed to tread on air.

Life and light and hope had been restored to him. He could have run and leaped and sung aloud for joy.

In the first glow and enthusiasm of his happiness he had no consideration for the uncertainty of its basis, for the difficulties to be encountered before he could realise his vision and hold its substance in his grasp. Already, in fancy, she was once more installed at the parsonage—that woman he had loved and lost, reigning undisputed queen of his heart and home. Already he was pouring in her

ears his past sorrows, his present happiness, his future devotion. It seemed quite natural that he should find her settled in her own place at the fireside when he got home.

Yet on his return, though it had led him many miles out of his way, he could not resist the temptation of visiting once more the well-remembered walk at Plumpton Priors, where she had first listened to his pleading, and promised, under certain conditions, to be his own. Scrupulously, and with a strength of mind in which he took no little pride, he had hitherto avoided a spot endeared by such memories, embittered by such a contrast between the present and the past. Now, in his great joy, it seemed only natural that he should convince himself of its reality by the organs of sight and sense. The wintry moon shone bright and clear as he leaped the wire fencing into the laurel walk, and stooped to the earth, grown-up man as he was, and priest of Holy Church, to kiss the spot where he remembered she had set her foot. Then he went upon his knees, leaning his head against a gnarled old oak, and thanked God from a full heart, weeping, for the second time since his childhood, but now, for very gratitude and joy.

When he rose to his feet he was himself again, and remembered, as was his wont, the sorrows and necessities of others.

A poor old woman at the Lodge, a *protégée* of Annie Dennison, being indeed the same who had accepted Horace Maxwell's apostrophe to Barmecide as a compliment to herself, was suffering, as poor old women so often do, from what she called "the rheumatics." It was hardly seven o'clock. Lexley could do no less than knock at the door of her cottage, and ask how she found herself.

It is unnecessary to detail the symptoms of her malady, as she herself did at great length, or to explain, which that practitioner could not, why the "doctor's stuff" did her no mortal good. Satisfied that the disease was lodged in her bones, she expressed also a solemn conviction that it would remain in them long after she had done with those and all other component parts of her bodily frame.

Trusting humbly that she might get to heaven at last, she was obviously not without misgivings that even in the abode of bliss her spirit would be racked by twinges of the old enemy. In the meantime "her back had been that bad," she was kind enough to inform Lexley, "that she had not been able to tie her own garters for the last fortnight." Condoling with her on such a state of things, he was about to take leave, when she stopped him with a question, hitherto delayed, as not bearing on her immediate concerns.

"Had the parson heard better news of our old squire? The last accounts was bad as bad could be. She felt sure when he drove out of that there gate a week ago come Friday, as *she* would never see him no more. Else why had she been a-dreaming of a baby with a candle in its hand, and a black dog with a red collar, which everybody knowed meant as one or other wasn't to be here for long? It wasn't rheumatics, she had heard say; but worser than that, if worser indeed could be."

Lexley gathered that his old friend Mr. Dennison had been so ill, the Middleton doctor advised removal to London for advice, and that the daily accounts of his state received at the house became more and more alarming with each succeeding post.

CHAPTER XXIII

WANTED—A WIFE

MR. DENNISON'S illness, succeeding the disclosures of the dying convict, caused Lexley to determine on starting at once for London, where he could ascertain the state of his old friend's health, and prosecute in person the search after his wife. He performed his journey in high spirits, anticipating, somewhat unreasonably, that he should have little difficulty in tracing Laura to her hiding-place, that he should find Uncle John recovering, and that, in accordance with the universal law of compensation, the happiness of the present would make immediate amends for the sorrows of the past.

He knocked at Mr. Dennison's door, and the servant shook her head. "Master was no better since yesterday. The doctor was coming again to-night."—"Was Mrs. Dennison at home?" "Mrs. Dennison was out in the carriage."—"Could he see Miss Dennison?" "Miss Dennison was staying at Mrs. Pike's." He had omitted to bring a card. No matter for that; the servant knew him, was glad to see him looking so hearty, and—this with a pause of hesitation—hoped as he had left all well at home.

Standing on the pavement outside, Lexley seemed to realise for the first time the material difficulties of his task.

An advertisement in the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, all the newspapers in general circulation, so worded that, while impossible to misapprehend for those interested, it lifted no corner of that sacred veil in which every Englishman loves to shroud his domestic affairs, seemed the first step; but when he remembered how seldom Laura cared to look at a newspaper, how improbable it was that she would take one in for her own perusal, and how, in the state of seclusion she had doubtlessly adopted, nobody else was likely to impart to her the news of the day, this was much too feeble a thread on which to hang his hopes. He thought of our police arrangements, our detective system, the researches of our Inspector Buckets, and the organisation of Scotland Yard. Finally he elected to confide his case to a private inquiry office, and wait, with exceeding impatience, for the result.

He lost no time, therefore, in proceeding to one of these resorts for the intriguing, the inquisitive, and the perplexed. It is not too much to say that he felt a little disappointed at the total absence of mystery with which he was ushered into a room like a lawyer's office, and accosted by a stout, good-humoured personage, who bowed, smiled, and rubbed his hands, more like a dentist with designs on his double teeth, than a power to whose keeping were entrusted the honour of great houses, the happiness of noble families, the hopes, fears, embarrassments, entanglements, and peccadilloes of society in general.

"Cold seasonable weather," said the grand inquisitor, stirring his fire cheerfully. "Must expect it at this time of year. Comes all the same whether we expect it or not. And what can we do for you, sir? No hurry! My time is yours.

If you will state your case, I'll take down anything that strikes me. Don't agitate yourself. Nothing to make you nervous. It's our business, you know, and we do it every day."

"I'm not agitated and I'm not nervous," protested Lexley with some vehemence. "I wish to trace a person I have lost sight of for some months, whose welfare is very dear to me, and who, I have reason to believe, is at this moment concealed somewhere in London."

"Very good, sir. *Very* good," observed the other, opening his note-book. "Person male or female?"

"Female, of course!" replied the clergyman, and the grand inquisitor smiled.

"Excuse me, sir," he continued after a pause, composing his features to a judicial austerity. "It is my duty to ask you, whether the carrying out of your inquiries would in any way conduce to the subversion of good morals and propriety?"

Lexley lost patience. Had he taken only deacon's orders, I think he would have sworn outright. "Gracious heavens!" he exclaimed. "Good morals! Propriety! Why, man, it's my wife!"

Was she his wife? A cold hand seemed to close about his heart while he reflected that their marriage, however binding in the sight of heaven, had been illegal on earth; but he repeated in a fainter voice, "It's my wife I'm looking for—my wife that you must help me to find."

"Quite so—quite so," assented the other, as if this were indeed their special line of business, and a priest in holy orders might be seen at their office every day in the week in quest of his missing spouse. "Height, if you please, as nearly as you can give it. Complexion, colour of eyes and hair.

General appearance. Thank you. Dress not so material. Some months, you say, have elapsed since your last interview. Can you oblige me with the exact date?"

It was written in blood on the tablets of his heart. No wonder he gave it correctly. "And she left in consequence of some misunderstanding between you? Such things take place every day. I have been told," added the grand inquisitor, who was obviously a bachelor, "that in these cases there are generally faults on both sides."

"I don't know what you mean by faults," said Lexley; "she was a woman without faults, and we never had a quarrel in our lives. She was subjected to persecution by a man who extorted money from her, and she left her home, to spare me rather than herself. The man is dead. I am sure of it, for I attended his deathbed. He knew no more what had become of her than I do. Is it necessary to enter into all these particulars?"

To this the grand inquisitor answered, with considerable show of reason, that the fuller the confidence reposed in him, the more detailed the information he could obtain, the greater would be the chance of bringing his inquiries to a successful issue.

"We may lose the whole thread," said he, "for want of certainty on a mere trifle like the colour of a ribbon. The most unimportant circumstance, such as the entering of a house to procure refreshment, the purchase of a railway-ticket, even the payment of a toll at a foot-bridge, may furnish us with a clue to guide us from one conclusion to another, till we have put piece to piece, like a child's puzzle, and completed our task to the satisfaction of everybody concerned. We profess to make 'private inquiries

in the strictest confidence.' Our inquiries cannot but be limited in proportion as that confidence is withheld. If I might presume to advise, sir, I should say, state the case without the slightest reservation. The result becomes a mere question of time and expense."

Thus adjured, Lexley detailed those circumstances connected with his wife's flight and the reasons that led to it, with which we are already acquainted. The grand inquisitor listened attentively, took voluminous notes, and concluded their interview with the appalling question—

"You have no reason to suspect violence? In all cases of mysterious disappearance, it would be madness if we shut our eyes to the possibility of foul play."

Altogether, Algernon Lexley left the private inquiry office very much more uneasy in his mind than when he went in.

It would be tedious to follow him through the many turns and windings of his wearisome and interminable chase. Morning after morning he rose with the conviction that the day must produce some new discovery, some definite result. Night after night he lay down dispirited, despondent, fain to cry with so many other vexed and stricken souls, "How long, Lord, how long?"

But one consideration kept him from despair. It was the suggestion made by the grand inquisitor. He would not, he dared not, dwell upon the chance of violence; and it seemed that to lose hope, ever so little, was to give tacit adherence to this ghastly supposition.

After a time he resolved to remain in London, and thought himself fortunate in exchanging his country curacy for one in the crowded neighbour-

hood of Smithfield; only temporarily, however, for vague and improbable as seemed its realisation, the dream of his life was still to install Laura once again as mistress of her old home.

But hope deferred was making the heart very sick. The zealous minister of the gospel who threaded those narrow Smithfield alleys, looked almost as gaunt and wasted as he who had walked the country doing good from Oakley Hamlet to Middleton Lordship. There was, nevertheless, this difference. The grim expression of effort had passed from his face. It showed weariness now, even anxiety; but was no longer warped with the contraction of a persistent and unremitting struggle. He could look forward at least to the possibility of happiness. Alas! that it seemed so wavering, so uncertain, and so far away!

The new parson worked hard amongst his flock, in which, though exceedingly numerous, the black sheep seemed out of all proportion, both for numbers and blackness. To these he paid particular attention; and it is possible that his ministrations were none the less successful because of a nature that could appreciate physical temptation to evil, because of a human heart that in stress of human sorrow had once nearly fallen away to a godless despair.

It is not everybody who can understand the exquisite pleasure of beer to a strong, healthy, hard-working frame, exhausted by continuous labour, or the tempting excitement produced by intoxication on a brain that finds no music, no painting, no poetry, to satisfy its desires, and in its sober moments knows of no mental stimulant more exciting than to calculate the price of coals or read the advertisements in a penny paper.

It is little wonder that an ignorant, unlettered,

uncultivated man gets drunk, or that when drunk he gets into mischief. No repressive legislation can do much to remedy the evil; but I cannot help thinking the schoolmaster is a deadly foe to John Barleycorn; and I do not see, when he has received a good education, lives in a comfortable home, has opportunities for intellectual recreation and social intercourse with friends of his own class, that the labourer is one bit more inclined to inebriety than the gentleman who employs him.

We are apt to forget the temptations of the public-house—the light, the warmth, the fiddle, and the friends—as contrasted with an untidy home, in which children perhaps are ailing and the wife may be a shrew. The man goes in to light his pipe and partake of that half-pint which in such society would seem to be a bottomless measure unfathomable as mid-ocean. Once in, it is natural that he should find some difficulty in getting out. The landlord greets him with warmth, the pot-boy serves him with deference, the barmaid, if there is one, wears for him her bluest ribbons and her brightest smiles. Bill shoves the tempting pewter with its white frothing head under his very nose; honest Jim, with whom he had "a few words" on Monday, insists on his sharing the draught that is to drown all unkindness. One slaps him heartily on the back, another nods kindly over his quart pot; with every man round he has a community of interests, ideas, pleasures, above all, of cares; and I will ask any gentleman, whose hospitable face brightens while he rings the bell for that "other" bottle of claret we should all be better without, if he can be surprised that under such conditions half a pint goes so short a way.

Now Lexley could understand the working-man's

habits, his toils, his amusements, his pleasures, and his temptations; could speak to him, as it were, in his own language, and though he assumed no superiority of nature in virtue of his office, never shrank from administering deserved reproof. He treated his parishioners as equals, with the manly courtesy that wins favour from all classes. They respected his firmness, his courage, his unbending persistency, in the course he thought right, and the clergyman's tall form soon came to be welcome in many a squalid lodging, where the inmates had heretofore been left in ignorance of any truths more important than those which affected the earning of their daily bread.

Like all men who have habituated themselves to real work, he possessed the gift of method, without which time is wasted and energy thrown away. He adopted a system in his daily rounds that left no part of his parish unvisited, and might have been compared to a careful gardener, who detects and removes the weeds from his flower-beds day by day as they appear. There was much to do, and he did it with all his might.

But notwithstanding his unflagging zeal, his indomitable perseverance, the old wound was still unstanched, the aching void remained. Though he laboured hard in the vineyard, and never neglected one tittle of his duty towards his flock, he relaxed not for an instant in his search, hoping against hope, believing even when belief seemed to have become absurdity. How often in the crowded streets had his heart leapt wildly up to greet some distant figure that it would fain recognise for Laura! how often, when the figure drew near, and the illusion was dispelled, had it sunk into hopeless apathy, to be aroused again, credulous as ever, on

the very next occasion. Even the "roughs" among whom his labours lay, did not fail to remark that the "long parson," as they called him, was subject to sudden fits of abstraction when any female figure above the average height drew near, and made their own comments, less respectful than humorous, on this peculiarity.

There was a mystery about their ghostly adviser which they did not care to solve, making little account of mysteries in the daily struggle for life, and having indeed another puzzle, if they chose to trouble themselves about it, in the person of a lady visitor who took exceeding pains with their wives, their morals, and their children, going about on foot at all hours and in all places, with the sole object, as it seemed, of doing good.

"I'll never believe but what angels is turned out on the pattern of she," declared a burly costermonger whose society Lexley much affected, in the hope of weaning him from a strongly developed tendency to inebriety. "Painted different colours, maybe; some on 'em with wings and some without, in course, but as like as one periwinkle is to another. Why, look here, master! T'other night, when I come in on her up at my place nursing Mrs. Golder's babby wot died, blowed if I didn't think as her very back must itch where the feathers was a-growing. I tell ye I wouldn't have been surprised a morsel not to have seen her fly right off, babby and all, the shortest way to heaven, or wherever her sisters are waiting to take her in."

The costermonger — a gentleman in knee-breeches, by name Franks — was perhaps not strictly sober while indulging these flights of fancy; but he succeeded in exciting his listener's curiosity, and Lexley could not but desire further particulars

regarding this celestial being, whose wings were already supposed to be sprouting here on earth.

It was early in the winter's evening, and the gasman had not yet completed his rounds. As light after light was called into existence by this functionary, Mr. Franks looked on with approval. Presently he turned to the clergyman and thus delivered himself:—

"I knows no more of her, master,—not of her natur', you understand,—than I knows of that theer light. I can't tell ye, not for certain, where it comes from when they turns it on, nor where it goes to when they turns it off. I can't tell ye whether it ain't the same breed as them stars up yonder by the house-tops. Similarly, I can't believe but what she comes of the same sort as them angels I seen in picture-books, as I heard once singing beautiful in the hospital that time when I fell off old Simpkins's van on my jolly head."

"What is she like?" asked the clergyman eagerly, while his foolish heart beat fast with the wild hope that a thousand disappointments had not been able to destroy. "A tall, pale woman, isn't she, with long brown hair?"

Franks was didactic, as well as drunk.

"In my opinion," said he, "there's angels of different colours, just like birds, you know. Why not? This here fowl has got eyes as black as sloes, and beautiful dark hair as soft as silk. She isn't tall, master, and she isn't short; she is exactly the right size, you'd think as she was made a purpose! And she smiles so sweet, it's like bringing a candle into the room. We're rough chaps, some of us, down here, as *you* know, master, but when our lady passes, *I've* not seen the man yet as would make bold to keep his hat on and look straight into her

face. I should like *to* see that man. I'd precious soon knock his hat off for him, and his jolly head along of it. But bless ye, she can't a-bear to hear of anything like fighting, or such games. 'Love one another,' says she to the very children playing in the dirt. There! I tell ye, if she was only to lift her finger I'd lay down to be stamped to pieces in that there gutter and welcome; strike me dead if I wouldn't! And not me only, but hundreds and hundreds of chaps round here and down water-side, that's rougher and worser nor me, though I'm bad enough, Lord knows!"

"Why don't you try to get better, then?" said Lexley. "It's no excuse for turning out a bad piece of work that you knew you were messing it all the time. Why don't you begin at once? Drink a pint instead of a quart; leave off cursing for want of something to say. Go down on your knees to-night before you lie on your back. Have a clean shirt and a clean shave, and come to church next Sunday. I'll preach you a sermon, not too long, and walk home with you afterwards if you like."

"So I will!" exclaimed the costermonger. "So help me Bob, I will, if it's only to please our lady. 'Franks,' says she yesterday morning, 'why don't I never see you at church?' 'Lady,' says I, 'I ain't good enough.' 'Why don't ye try and get better, then?' says she, just like you said, master. I know she means what's right, and I think you do. I don't see why I'm not to be better, same as my neighbours. And about that theer pint, master; it's a mean, shabby measure, is a pint, and Parliament ought to put it down, says I; but if *you* think a man gets twice as good for drinking half as much beer, why, I'll see if I can cut off *my* tap a bit and take it out in 'baccy. In that there ship as she told us about,

and wanted me to sail in for foreign parts, there wasn't to be no liquor allowed of no kind. Nothing to drink, master, not for seven, maybe eight, weeks. It's enough to choke a man only to think of it!"

"Was that why you didn't go?" asked the clergyman.

Franks laughed huskily and winked.

"I'd have gone to the ends of the 'arth," he replied, "and so would all of us, if only she'd have come too, and been made our queen. We offered to sail, three hundred stout chaps, as could do a day's work and fight 'rough-and-tumble' with any three hundred as ever stepped to that theer place she told us of beyond the seas, if so be as only she would come along to share the land, and make the laws, and rule over us, right or wrong. But, 'No,' says she, 'my kind and noble hearts,' says she, '*my* duty lies here, and I sticks by my duty,' says she; 'and that's all about it.' Well, I wasn't a-going to ship myself aboard of a ship with nothing to drink, and leave our lady behind; so I stayed at home, I did; and that's the way, master, as I come for to know you!"

"I'm but a new friend," said Lexley. "Your lady, as you call her, has been with you, I suppose, a considerable time?"

"Better nor four months," answered the costermonger. "Four months last Toosday she dropped on to us, like a blossom drops off a apple-tree. Tom Squales' little wench was took with cramps, and the mother down with fever, and Tom hisself in trouble, no matter why. My mate he was, and I'll take my oath he never took it, but the beak guv him six months; when our lady comes softly into their place. 'I'm sorry for you,' says she, 'but that's not good enough. I'm come to lend you a

hand,' says she, 'if you'll only give me leave.' With that she takes the poor little child on her knee, and gives it doctor's stuff to cure the cramps, and she nurses Poll Squales through the fever, and she writes to the governor or somebody, and gets news of poor Tom in quod. I tell ye, master, the whole lot would have asked no better than to go down and kiss her feet. Since then, there's not a day but she's amongst us, up and down, backward and forward, with her little basket and her clever hands and her soft eyes, that makes a chap feel dashed as he hasn't got his Sunday clothes on, and her sweet smile that's like sunshine on the water when you catch a blink of the river out of Thames Street. Holy Moses! There she is!"

The rough, strong fellow's hand shook with emotion while he gripped the clergyman's arm to arrest his attention. Ten paces off, advancing towards them in the full light of the gas-lamps, walked a well-remembered figure that had once caused Lexley's heart to tingle with a feeling he mistook for love. As it drew nearer, a well-remembered voice accosted his companion. "The wife is better, Franks," it said cheerfully. "I've just left her. You're late to-night." And then the speaker stopped short and gazed in the clergyman's face, while in tones of unconcealed surprise that seemed the echoes of each other, the two exclaimed simultaneously, "Miss Dennison!" "Mr. Lexley!"

"Miss Dennison!"
"Mr Lexley!"

H. M. Brock 1898

CHAPTER XXIV

MIXED MOTIVES

TO explain this unexpected meeting in the narrow street near Smithfield, we must go back several weeks to the close of the preceding summer, and detail a conversation with her friend Mrs. Pike, in which Annie thought well to proclaim her sentiments on things in general, and express her intentions for the future.

These two ladies were sitting in the boudoir of the former, an exceedingly pretty and cheerful apartment, with glass doors opening on a garden, in which dogs were running about, children playing, and green leaves fluttering, as if South Kensington were forty miles from Temple Bar, instead of four; there was plenty of sunshine, there was a fresh breeze, there was a German band in the street, a piping bullfinch in the window, a pug snored on the hearthrug, and the baby had just been sent upstairs. Everything denoted peace, joy, and contentment—everything was happy and cheerful except Miss Dennison's face.

That young lady could no more look, than she could feel, ill-tempered, but her cheek was pale, and the soft dark eyes seemed recently to have been wet with tears.

Mrs. Pike, in a morning costume of spotless muslins and flounces and trimmings, adapted with

no little ingenuity to the occasional exigences of a matron's figure, was fresher, brighter, prettier than ever, and, to use her maid's expression, looked "as clean as a new pin." She had made tea, attended prayers, scolded the General, ordered dinner, verified her visiting-book, played with baby till he succumbed to hiccough, and performed her morning duties as usual. The time had come to arrange her programme for the day.

"The open carriage, Annie, of course," she observed, "in such weather as this; what time shall I say?"

"If you don't want me, dear, I think I had rather not go out," replied Annie.

Mrs. Pike opened her eyes, showing a great deal of the whites, which were very white indeed.

"Not go out!" she repeated. "You're ill, my dear, I know you are. I'll send for Bolus at once. There will be just time to catch him. He always comes home for luncheon. I won't drive to-day, I'll stay and nurse you. Go and lie down this minute."

"But I'm not ill," protested Annie, "and if I was, I know exactly what Bolus would say, 'We want *tone*, my dear young lady; we want *iron*, we want building up, not pulling down'; then he would order me what I hate. Tonics and port wine in the middle of the day. The General is quite right, the best doctors are those who allow you to get well."

"The General knows nothing about it," answered his wife. "I promise you when *he's* ill, I dose him to some purpose. But if you won't let me send for Bolus, why not try fresh air and amusement? You're moped, my dear. It's been a fearfully dull season. You were moped at your uncle's, that was why I carried you off to my own house; and now you're moped here. I don't wonder, I'm sure.

MIXED MOTIVES

The Perigords' dinner last night was worse than a funeral. Even that boy of theirs couldn't make it go off, and Lady Dundrum's ball was stupider still. Why didn't you dance oftener, Annie? I saw you send away partner after partner. My dear, if you are really bored I shall be wretched. It *is* so bad for people. I've been told it might bring on feeble action of the heart!"

"But I'm not bored, Lettie," answered the other. "You don't know how I like being here with you and baby. I'm not bored, or moped as you call it, the least."

"Then let us go and see the Life Guards play polo."

Annie shook her head.

"The Botanical Gardens? The Horticultural? The Academy? Is there nothing that would amuse you? I have it! We'll take Poppy and Trix to the Zoo!"

"Poppy's got a cold," answered Miss Dennison, "and Trix is too little. It's not good for her to be so frightened as she was last time."

These young ladies were the Misses Pike. "Poppy," whose real name was Cecilia, being four and a half; her sister, Miss Beatrice, barely three. The latter heroine, having faced undauntedly both bears and lions, and divided her young affections between the ugliest monkey and the Keeper of the Great Seal, had given way unexpectedly in presence of the zebra, a quadruped that seemed to excite in her emotions of the utmost terror and aversion.

Mrs. Pike laughed. "Poor Trix," she said. "Nurse tells me she has dreamt of the beasts ever since, and nothing will induce her to play with her Noah's Ark. You're right, Annie. We will put off the Zoo till the children are older. However,

I'm quite sure of one thing. Going about don't amuse you as it used. My dear — I wonder — I wonder whether"—

"Whether what?" replied Annie, sharply for *her*.

"You won't be angry, dear," said her friend, "and you needn't tell me more than you choose; but I haven't seen Mr. Mortimer anywhere since you danced with him so often the night of my ball."

Annie blushed. "What do you mean, Lettie?" she asked. "Speak out. I couldn't be angry with *you*."

"I mean, dear, whether you don't find it rather dull without him," hazarded Mrs. Pike, trying the ice, as it were, before she went too far. "You had got used to him, you know; he was never out of your pocket, it's quite natural you should miss him now. And, Annie dear, don't you think—don't you think you were beginning to like him just ever such a little?"

Annie's colour deepened, but with the flush of denial, not acknowledgment, of pride rather than affection.

"Dear Lettie!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "I should have thought you knew me better."

"Girls never confess," continued the young matron. "But nobody can be so fond of you as I am, Annie, and you ought to tell me the truth."

"So I will," said the other, "though as a general rule I don't think it at all fair to make such disclosures. But I know I am safe with you, dear, and that it will go no further. Mr. Mortimer did—did"—

"Propose to you!" exclaimed Mrs. Pike, jumping up and clapping her hands. "Darling Annie, I give you joy. You sly thing, why didn't you tell me at once?"

"I only said he *proposed* to me," replied Miss Dennison in rather a mournful voice. "I didn't say I accepted him. There are two very short words, either of which answers such a question once for all. I chose the shortest."

Mrs. Pike's face fell, and she sat down again. "Annie, Annie," she expostulated, "you can't mean you said No!"

"I said No, and I meant No," answered Miss Dennison with considerable firmness. "Now, Lettie, you'll believe if I want to stop at home to-day, it's not because I expect Mr. Mortimer to call."

But Lettie was following out the thread of her own reflections half aloud. "Well-born, well-dressed, good temper, good fortune, charming manners, and good-looking; yes, certainly good-looking, for an eldest son. Annie, Annie, I see it all. There is somebody else you like better!"

"There isn't!" protested Annie with a vehemence that considerably weakened the denial. "You've no right to say that, Lettie, even if it was true, which it's not."

Mrs. Pike shook her head gravely. "Then, my dear, I come back to the old story, and it's a case for Bolus! There's something wrong somewhere. You're pale, you're out of spirits; you're not like yourself. And, darling, I've thought two or three times lately you looked as if you had been crying. Annie, *what* is it? I wish I could do something to help you."

"You're quite right, dear," answered Miss Dennison, taking her friend's hand and kissing it. "I'm not happy; I'm not satisfied. There's something wrong, and nobody can help me but myself. Lettie dear, don't you often wonder what we are all put here for?"

"Good gracious, no!" answered Mrs. Pike, who was quite satisfied with the world as she found it, believing, not unreasonably, that to make the comfort of her home, her General, and her servants, to settle with her tradespeople, amuse her baby, romp with Poppy and Trix, teach them their alphabet, and prepare them for the catechism, was the sum of her duties, and enough, too, for any one woman to undertake. "I never trouble my head about that kind of thing. We must be put somewhere, I suppose. And why not here?"

Ignoring a question that, although simple in itself, opened up a whole labyrinth of metaphysical subtleties and speculations, Miss Dennison, like a thorough woman, took refuge from argument in declamation.

"Oh, Lettie!" she exclaimed, "I feel so frivolous, so useless, so unnecessary. It seems as if I had no established place in the world, and it wouldn't make the slightest difference to anybody, except you and baby, perhaps, if there was no *me*. I am exactly like a lost dog in a market, or a stray sheep in a lane. I've puzzled and puzzled over it times without end, but it's no use. Uncle John says woman's right is to be good-looking, her privilege to be well-dressed, and her duty to be sweet-tempered. Dear old thing! he declares I am all these, and no more is to be expected of me, but something here, in my heart, tells me he's wrong. I have energies, and I'm certain I ought to use them. I cannot admit that a head is only intended for one's maid to arrange, and a pair of hands for one's gloves to fit tight. There must be work for a woman to do, if she can only find it out. Why mayn't I take my share with the others?"

"What others?" asked Mrs. Pike, bewildered by her friend's eloquence. "Why can't you be like the girls we see every day? Only nicer, of course."

"Because I can't!" said Annie, rising from her chair, and pacing through the room. "You might as well ask a bird why it wants to fly, or a cat why it catches mice. It's my nature, I suppose, and I can't help it any more than my unhappy sex. Why wasn't I born a man? Every man has his place in the world and knows it!"

"I am not sure of that," observed Mrs. Pike, reflecting on various instances of male audacity that she had been obliged to set down. "But having come into the world as a female infant, having been christened Annie, and presented at a drawing-room, it seems rather late in the day to make a change, that's all."

"I'm not talking of change," replied Annie. "I'm quite serious. I intend to give up balls, drums, dinners — particularly dinners — garden parties, private theatricals, operas, French plays, everything that seems a selfish waste of time and money. I shall get no more new dresses this season, and only one bonnet. If you and the General don't object, dear, I shall ask the Vicar to let me take a class in his Sunday school. This is at least a step in the right direction."

The Vicar was over seventy, and as ugly as he was good. Mrs. Pike could not see her way.

"By degrees," continued Miss Dennison, warming with the subject, "I shall hope to enlarge the circle of my usefulness, I shall get more acquainted with the wants of a London parish, learn how I can best become a comfort to my poorer neighbours. If there are blind people I shall read to them, sick and sorrowful I shall give them what little comfort

I can. Perhaps before long I shall be allowed to visit the patients in the hospitals!"

"Think of the smells!" said Mrs. Pike.

Annie curled up her pretty little nose.

"I *have* thought of them, dear," she answered. "That's where I shall break down, I know. It's what I'm most afraid of. But if I can get over this weakness and prejudice—I'm sure it's only prejudice—think how useful I may be. Can't you fancy a poor fellow brought into the Accident Ward; a bricklayer, for instance, who has fallen off a scaffolding, with half a dozen bones broken. When the pain lulls a little, and the doctors are gone to attend someone else, how slowly the hours must drag, how wearisome he must find the whitewashed walls, the bare floor, the noiseless steps of the nurses moving up and down! Think how he must welcome a woman, a real lady like any of us, who, from sheer sympathy, comes to cheer him up and ask him how he is. Why, he would get well in half the time. I daresay that was the way Miss Nightingale began, and I respect her more than any woman I ever heard of. Don't you remember the wounded soldier who kissed her shadow on his pillow as she passed by? Lettie, I think that is the most touching story I ever heard."

Mrs. Pike, though of opinion that it was better to have somebody one liked to kiss the substance rather than the shadow, could not but acknowledge the nobility of Miss Nightingale's example, while refusing to admit any necessity for Annie to follow it. "There are plenty of people without you, dear," she argued, "who would do it much better. You know trained nurses always declare that amateurs are worse than useless."

"But everybody must begin by being an

amateur," argued Miss Dennison. "People are not born sick-nurses, with white aprons and smart ribbons in their caps. I don't think I shall wear a cap, Lettie, but I shall go about in black; it seems more respectful to those who are in pain or sorrow."

"And it's very becoming," assented Mrs. Pike. "The General likes me best in black, though I nearly always wear white."

"I am not the least afraid of undertaking it," continued Annie, passing over the question of costume. "I was reading about it in a book the other day. The man says one's whole mind should be engrossed by the profession, and one should care very little for anything else. That's exactly my case. I care so very little for anything else!"

Now the meaning of all this was a good deal of disappointment, a good deal of affection, and some *pique*, acting on a high spirit, a generous and unselfish heart. It is but justice to Percy Mortimer to say that with his many amiable qualities, backed by his advantages of person and fortune, he would hardly have found himself rejected by Annie Dennison had not her affections been engaged elsewhere. They *were* engaged, and he *was* rejected, Miss Annie going to bed after her friend's ball with a proud consciousness that at some sacrifice of ambition she had been true to her own heart.

We blame the woman who makes what we choose to call a mercenary marriage; the most energetic amongst us even denounce and revile her as though she were no better than those who dispense with the ceremony altogether; but, as usual, when we judge hastily, our verdict is unsound. There are a thousand exigences to which, from his sex, a man is superior, that urge the female nature, in defiance of its own impulses, to take the first

shelter offered. He requires no adviser when he disputes a tradesman's bill, no protector when he walks across Piccadilly through the carriages, or stares about at the illuminations on the Queen's birthday. She is so trammelled by conventionalities that she hardly likes to be seen alone in a hansom cab. In nine cases out of ten a woman gains her liberty by marriage; whether a man loses his depends on his own tact and temper no less than his wife's, but she is wise who guides her husband, as she should her horse, with a loose rein and a light hand, that if he is at all inclined to be hasty or irritable, as much as possible lets his head alone.

I am not speaking now of the irresistible pressure that can be put on a girl by circumstances, friends, and relations, compelling her to marry against her will. Had it not been that "father brak' his arm, and our cow was stown awa'"—the Scottish lassie would never have yielded up her own happiness, from the very tenderness of her heart that caused her such agonies of remorse when her sea-going "Jamie" returned too late. A woman dearly loves a sacrifice. She is always ready to immolate herself freely, and on occasion, rather than come empty-handed to the altar, will even offer up the man she loves.

But Annie Dennison, thinking Mr. Maxwell the best waltzer, the most agreeable companion, the handsomest, the cleverest, the bravest, to sum up all in one word, the nicest of men, having in short suffered his image considerably idealised to enter a citadel where it carefully locked itself in, showed both firmness and wisdom in declining the advances of his friend. Neither of these qualities did she exercise, however, in her subsequent treatment of the man whom she would not quite confess she

loved. Because he looked wretched she despatched him, as we have seen, to take care of young Perigord in the supper-room. Because he expressed himself thereupon with a certain half-abject, half-bitter devotion, she refrained from wishing him good-night.

When he next met her, and accosted her with all the exultation created by Percy Mortimer's own confessions at daybreak, she had become so high and mighty that poor Horace was once more reduced to depths of despair, and finally, after a fortnight of anger and heart-burnings on one side, of wounded pride and secret tears on the other, of constrained sentences and affected indifference on both, the gentleman so completely lost his temper, that he applied for an appointment necessitating his immediate departure to Vienna, and the lady, assuring herself, though she did not believe it, that he was in some entanglement with the former Miss Blair, determined henceforth to lavish on her diseased fellow-creatures the affections to which this paragon of the Foreign Office seemed no longer entitled.

As both must have been satisfied on reflection that he would return during the winter, they deserved some credit for being so heart-broken by a separation which was purely voluntary, and not likely to be of long continuance at the worst.

So Annie remained in London with Mrs. Pike, who was unwilling for domestic reasons to leave a home before which it seemed probable that straw must be laid down during some period of the autumn. The unmarried lady, while proving a great comfort to her friend, in the trying situation women bear so heroically, by no means abandoned her resolution of ministering to the poor. She was active, she was quiet, she was blessed with vigorous

health, when she took plenty of exercise; she had a kind heart, she had a sweet voice, above all she was thoroughly in earnest, and by the time she met Lexley under the gas-lamps, she had been some months a daily visitor through a parish hitherto considered the most abandoned in London, and had earned for herself a character amongst its rough beer-drinking population, of which Mr. Franks, the costermonger, in his wildest flights of fancy, considered himself but a feeble exponent.

In the contemplation of poor men's sorrows, her own seemed trifling by contrast; in the daily effort to alleviate them, her self-reproaches vanished, her spirits rose, the colour came back to her cheek, the sparkle to her eyes. It is not too much to say that "our lady," as they called her, in her plain black dress, with a basket on her arm, was to the rude natures she refined a living type of all that is best and purest and loveliest on earth. To have given vent to an oath in her presence would have seemed sacrilege. Not to obey with alacrity her lightest wish was impossible, and the "navvy," or the bricklayer, shouldering his tools for his morning's work, enshrined her image in his breast, with something of the exalted and ennobling devotion paid by a knight of the Middle Ages to our Lady of Succour, when, laying lance in rest, he invoked her gracious help and favour at his need.

No wonder Annie Dennison's step was so airy, her glance so bright, her bearing so assured, in the innocent enjoyment of authority, the confidence of her own capability to do good.

"You look like a queen," said Lexley, as they shook hands, while Mr. Franks, self-restricted to a pint, went his way to fetch it at the nearest public-house.

"So I am a queen," she answered gaily, "a queen with loyal and true subjects who worship the very ground I tread on, without an enemy in the world, and only two difficulties in my government. Oh! Mr. Lexley, if it wasn't for beer and the children staying away from school, I should be the happiest woman on earth. But tell me about yourself. How came *you* here?"

"I should have asked the same question had I not met Franks," he answered, and thereupon embarked in a narrative of his doings, not unlike her own, refraining, however, from all mention of his wife, and referring his exchange of duties with the Smithfield curate to a sense of responsibility, a liking for work, a conviction that ministers of the gospel could not enlarge too much the circle of their experience, alleging every motive, in short, but the restlessness of an aching heart.

She too, in comparing notes, breathed not a word of inquiry about his friend, scrupulously avoiding all topics that might lead to the mention of Horace Maxwell's name. Both ignored that which was nearest and dearest to each. People always do. If you dine with a man expressly to talk over a particular subject, he never makes the slightest allusion to it till you are going away.

But Lexley gathered that the young lady had found many difficulties to contend with in her own family, before she could enter on her career of philanthropy and self-sacrifice. Aunt Emily, who "didn't see the least necessity for anything of the kind," declared the whole scheme "unlady-like," "vulgar," and when pressed on the subject, "absolutely wicked!" Uncle John, though appreciating the sentiment and approving of the motive, was in favour of "waiting a little; he never thought

it wise to do anything in a hurry." Other relatives followed suit. But for Pike's loyal adherence, Annie really believed she must have given way. *Her* General, however, who, as Mrs. Pike observed, "thought Annie could do no wrong," took up arms at once. "I see her making the comfort and the happiness of every place she enters," said the veteran, speaking very fast, and in a tone that the boldest dissent would scarcely dare oppose. "If I go into the nursery I find Poppy and Trix ready to eat her up. The baby, a determined young scoundrel, who is insubordinate with everybody else in the house, breaks into smiles and good-humour. Even cross old nurse, of whom I honestly own I am afraid, smooths her apron and looks pleased. If I visit my wife's sick-room, a faint voice whispers, 'Is that you, Annie?' before she finds out that it's only *me*. Not a servant upstairs or down but would fetch her water from — well — from a long way beyond Halifax if she wanted it. And as for myself, why, to see Annie about, is like having fresh-cut flowers every day on the table in one's barrack-room! But I'm not such a beast as to want to keep her all to ourselves. Because an officer commands his own regiment well, is that a reason he is not to be made a major-general? This scheme of doing good comes from her kind heart. It's promotion and active service too. For my part I say, Good luck to her, and God bless her."

So Annie remained a welcome guest in the Pikes' house, and from the basis of South Kensington, carried on her philanthropic operations at the East End of London.

CHAPTER XXV

A FRIEND IN NEED

IF you drop a stone into a pond, the watery circles thus described increase and widen, ring beyond ring, till they reach the utmost limits that the banks allow. In the same way, an energetic nature bent on doing good finds its range of benevolence extending day by day, till it comprises a thousand new objects for which it has hitherto taken no thought, and made no provision. Yet in this, as in most emergencies of life, with the difficulty grows the power to surmount it; in its very exigences are found the means by which the situation is mastered, and turned to good account.

Annie Dennison's first crusade was against the arch-enemy who had obtained too firm a footing in the territory she was resolved to subdue. Over-indulgence in beer was a habit difficult to subdue; one to be modified by degrees rather than eradicated with an effort. Tact, temper, mild persuasion did much. Ere long the fear of "our lady's" saddened shake of the head in sorrow, not in anger, prevailed over the opposing influences of ridicule, ostentation, good-fellowship, and habitual thirst. A drunken man became a rarity; a riotous one an impossibility.

The inspector at the nearest police-station expressed astonishment no less than approval, while he attested to a diminished wear-and-tear on the force. The constables, with eyes, faces, and limbs no longer bruised by violence in this world, and consigned to perdition in the next, blessed Miss Dennison from thankful hearts in their nightly vigils and their daily rounds.

When husbands had grown tolerably sober, it was no difficult task to render wives comparatively tidy and clean. Here and there, perhaps, a shrew, warped with a lifetime of hard work and harder usage, may have protested against the influence exercised over her own tyrant by this dainty damsel; but when she found the wages, heretofore squandered at the public-house, beginning to accumulate from shillings to pounds, while at the same time there was a loaf in the cupboard, a bit of fresh meat on the table, and a spoonful of strong black tea in the pot; when her "master's" home-coming ceased to be the signal for "a few words," alas! too often followed by a good many blows; when she herself could afford a clean gown and a bright ribbon for Sunday; when new shoes for the children seemed no longer an impossibility, ridiculous to contemplate—even the fiercest of these vixens could not but acknowledge it was a happy change, and admit that "Now as they'd got used to her, this here Miss might come round and welcome. She wasn't one of your prying sort, she wasn't, and if so be as she *was* a born lady, no doubt as she was 'elpful and 'andy and uncommon quick at her needle!"

Having reformed husbands and improved homes, Annie's next step was to educate the children. For this purpose, with the assistance of certain charitable

acquaintances, she rented a room, which she herself saw scrubbed, ventilated, and whitewashed; bought a few elementary books, a great many slates, with sponges hanging by a string, and engaged a school-mistress, strong in acquirements, authority, and testimonials, but, alas! feeble in health. After a few weeks' trial, this valuable acquisition broke down and felt obliged to resign. When Lexley met her in the street, Annie was on her way to keep an appointment at the school-house with an unknown individual who had seen in the baker's window a written announcement that the place was vacant, and had requested that tradesman's interest to obtain it. The baker's account was misty in the extreme. He had forgotten the applicant's name, entertained the vaguest notions of her dress and appearance, persisted in calling her a female, and seemed to have but this one lucid idea connected with the subject, that she would wait on the lady superintendent in the evening at the school, and therefore Miss Dennison took leave of Lexley more hastily than she could have wished, omitting a good many questions she would have liked to ask, a good many disclosures it would have been a pleasure to communicate.

The school-house was a gloomy apartment enough when illumined by one tallow candle. Annie, blinking in from the brighter gas-light outside, could only make out a tall, dark figure, closely veiled, that rose respectfully on her entrance. Miss Dennison's courtesy was always captivating. "I am so sorry to have kept you waiting," said she kindly, whereat the figure started, clasped its hands, and faltering out, "I beg your pardon, I—I am afraid there is some mistake," sank down on the wooden chair in an attitude of utter helplessness and prostration.

For a second time to-night Annie Dennison seemed destined to be surprised. In appearance and bearing, however, she formed a striking contrast to the other occupant of the apartment. The genial manner froze to one of dignified disapproval, the slight frame stiffened where it stood. It was as if a touch of some enchanted wand had turned a warm-blooded, loving, breathing young lady to a figure of ice.

Yet all the time the girl's heart beat wildly, joyfully, to think that Horace had now been in Vienna for weeks!

Nevertheless, only a woman could have conveyed by the mere inflection of tone, so much scorn as she put into the few words with which she accosted her visitor.

"Mrs. Lexley! I beg pardon. Miss Blair. I am not aware by which name you ought to be addressed."

Only a woman could have understood the whole cruelty of the insult, could have interpreted the challenge and the taunt.

Laura rose in proud defiance, lifted her veil, and looked full in the other's face.

"Miss Dennison," said she, "you are the last person on whom I wish to inflict my presence. Excuse me for having intruded. I will bid you good-evening, and retire at once."

But Annie had of late seen too much real sorrow, not to recognise the accents of an aching heart, however disguised in an assumption of haughty unconcern. Her own nature, too, had been necessarily softened by the daily habit of doing good. It was almost impossible for "our lady" to refrain from helping a fellow-creature in distress, while frequent contemplation of the easy

steps by which poor humanity descends to vice, the misery in which it becomes entangled, and the painful struggles through which alone it can be extricated, had impressed on her the beauty of that lesson which teaches us to hate the sin, while we sympathise with the sinner. Annie, who said her prayers with commendable regularity, did not find that the most difficult of her duties was to forgive others their trespasses against herself, much less then (although, as a woman, exceedingly intolerant of errors into which women are prone to fall), those who had trespassed against the laws of society.

I do not mean to assert that she would have relented quite so easily, had there been more reason to suppose that Horace Maxwell's withdrawal of his allegiance was in any way connected with Miss Blair, or that she might not have felt "the duty she owed to herself," demanded a sterner and more uncompromising bearing, but for the pleasing reflection, hitherto so bitter, that "Horace had been in Vienna for weeks!"

"Don't go," she said simply; "sit down—you look tired and ill—we used to be friends once. Will you not tell me if I can be of any use, any comfort to you now?"

Scorn for scorn the other could have flung back. Proud looks, disdainful gestures, she could have met with looks and gestures prouder and more disdainful; she would have yielded to no claim, admitted no assumption of superiority, would have returned revilings and defied reproof, but the kind words, the gentle tones, pierced to her heart like a knife. Weary, worn, friendless, exhausted for very want of food, the proud spirit gave way with the enfeebled frame. Sinking once more into the

chair, Laura laid her head on the table, and burst into a passion of tears.

"I am so miserable," she murmured, — "so miserable—I wish I was dead—I wish I was dead"—

The very words of how many a fallen woman whom lately she had soothed and consoled, guiding her, as only a sister can, along the upward path that leads again to life and hope! Not for all those words seemed to convey, was there a shade less of kindness in Annie's manner, a tone more of hardness in her voice, while resting her arm on the other's shoulder, and stroking her, as a nurse soothes a child, she whispered—

"Don't say that, dear; nothing is so bad but it might be worse. None are so wicked but they can struggle back into the ways of virtue if they will only try."

Laura raised her head, dried her tears, and opened her eyes wide with astonishment. Mistaking wonder for resentment, Annie continued in a soft and deprecating tone, "Nobody who has not gone through temptation knows what it is. We who have been spared the fiercest of all trials, ought not to be proud, only grateful;—I daresay under the same conditions, I should have been as bad as—as anybody else. Because a woman is degraded, she is not entirely lost. I, for one, will never turn my back on those who have humility to confess they did wrong, and courage to promise they will do right. The first step is gained when we are sorry for the past, the next when we have hope in the future. Don't be afraid to confide in me, dear. It will do you good to unburden your mind, and a fault confessed, even to a fellow-mortal, is a fault half repaired. Tell me your sorrows and I will

sympathise with them, tell me your sins and I will rebuke, not *you* but *them.*"

There was no mistaking the kindly pity of the tone, so at variance with the inferred accusation of dishonour that a woman must indeed have sunken low not to resent. Laura looked up partly in vague astonishment, partly in anger, soon to be disarmed by the soft sad eyes that met her own.

"Sins! Rebuke!" she repeated. "Miss Dennison, why do you think so hardly of me?"

"Because I have seen Mr. Lexley!" answered Annie gravely. "I parted from him not a quarter of a mile from here, not a quarter of an hour ago."

Laura started to her feet, glancing about like a wild creature, seeking some way of escape. "Is he coming?" she asked. "Miss Dennison, I implore you, don't let him find me! Don't tell him where I am. Does he know I am here?"

"You need have no fear," answered Annie, rather coldly. "He never mentioned your name. He is leading a noble life. He has the charge of our parish. Only for a time, I am sorry to say. He does his duty thoroughly. He is doing it now."

"How did he look? What did he say? Has he grown thin? Did he seem in low spirits? Was he walking fast and strong? Oh, Miss Dennison! I have nothing left on earth. Don't grudge telling me something, anything about *him.*"

The pale face worked convulsively, the grey eyes glared as with fierce animal hunger for tidings of the man she loved. Laura was standing erect, though trembling in every limb; but there could not have been more of abject supplication in her attitude had she dragged herself along the floor, grovelling to the other's feet.

"He is altered and unhappy," answered Annie,

very pitiful, and a little frightened. "You best know how much, as you best know why. But he has taken the wisest, the surest, the only course to remedy such an affliction as his."

"Not married again!" exclaimed Laura wildly. "He's not married again. Is she good? Is she beautiful? Does he love her? Oh, have mercy on me! Have mercy, Heaven! I didn't deserve this!"

"You couldn't have cared for him," said Annie reproachfully. "There are few such natures on earth. Married again! No. He is not one of those who suffer and forget. He bears his sorrow bravely, but he will bear it to his grave. How *could* you undervalue such a character? How could you be false to a man like that?" The other seized her hand, and pressed it to her own breast.

"God bless you!" she exclaimed, "and God forgive *me*. I ought to have rejoiced had it been otherwise, but I could not! I *could* not! And you think I don't care for him! don't love him! If you knew—if you only knew!"

"But I don't," said Annie kindly. "Will you not tell me? What can I think? What ought I to think? I know nothing definite. I have heard no particulars. You left him, and—and—of course it was for somebody else."

She blushed violently. Having said thus much, she would fain have drawn back. No sooner were the words out than she felt how inconsequent, how uncharitable was her conclusion.

The other only sighed, and for a space looked blankly in Miss Dennison's face. Then she seemed to arrive at some definite resolution, and her old manner came back, the natural dignity of her character asserted itself, while she made her appeal. It was no fallen woman excusing her trespass, no

conscious sinner pleading for mercy; it was stately, handsome Miss Blair, of whose calm beauty Annie had been a little jealous, that spoke now.

"If you loved somebody better than anything on earth, if you owed to him all the true happiness you ever knew, if you felt that whatever you did, whatever you *were*, however low you had sunk, that person alone would never blame and would never forget,—if there was but one way to save him, not from sorrow, anxiety, danger, but from shame—shame, Miss Dennison, worse than death! would you scruple to take that way, even though it led you into outer darkness, into a place of torment hardly to be endured by body or soul?"

"I suppose one would do a great deal for anybody one liked," replied Annie demurely, rather mistrusting this outburst of devotion, lest it might have been called forth by the Anybody, or rather the Somebody, of whom she was herself thinking.

"I have done a great deal for my husband, God knows," continued Laura. "My husband—yes, he *is* my husband in the sight of Heaven, though to claim him here on earth would be to bring ridicule on him as a man, disgrace on him as a minister of the Church. Miss Dennison, I will trust you. I have not a friend in the world!"

"Trust me!" answered Annie, whose horizon seemed brightening every moment. "And never say that again! I am your friend, dear, from this time forth. I am very obstinate if I take anything into my head, and I will never desert you, never."

Then out came the whole sad story as we know it already, and Annie listened with tearful eyes, wondering much, pitying much, admiring most of all. The barriers once broken down, Laura felt it an intense relief to pour into a sympathising ear the

narrative of her past life, with its adventures, its sorrows, and its unhappy climax, confessing her faults, acknowledging her imprudences, but dwelling chiefly on those memories which seemed now to constitute her all. She touched lightly on the petty triumphs of vanity she had won, on the mimicry of mortal strife from which she had so often carried off its tinsel prize. Even Victor's dark eyes and early death seemed to have faded from her heart, as from her memory the golden skies, the sapphire waters, and the purple islands of the Greek Sea. But she could not dwell too fondly, nor too minutely, on the roses at the parsonage window, the woodbine in its porch, the noble figure, and the kind, clear voice that made for her, wherever *he* was, a welcome refuge and a happy home.

"I like to think of it, dear," she said, fixing her eyes on the solitary tallow candle, now beginning to burn low. "I like to talk of it, I try to dream of it every night of my life, because, as you can now understand, I must never see it, nor him again! The only thing that keeps me up is to feel that whatever I suffer is for his sake, and perhaps some day he will know it, and think all the better of me then for the very contempt he must have for me now. Ah! that is the worst of the whole punishment. He must be so unhappy! I wish he could hate and despise me; I wish he had loved me less! No—I don't! Nothing lasts for ever. I must wear out in time. Perhaps, dear, when I *am* worn out and laid in my grave, you will tell him. He will see then that the woman he trusted, bad or good, right or wrong, was not so unworthy after all. If he had married some simpering girl, well portioned and well brought up, would she have done as much for him? I think not! There is something of the

savage in all of us. I like to reflect how I have baffled the villain who persecuted me, who would have persecuted him! I trust in Heaven that wretch is starving—starving at this moment. I know what starving means, and I wish him worse than that. I wish him all the evil he deserves! Yes; it's wrong, I daresay, but think how he has injured me. My girlhood, my womanhood, and then this last deadliest blow of all, ought I to forgive? Would Algy say I ought? Then I'll try, dear, I'll try. I'm not so strong as I used to be, and though one fights ever so hard, somehow courage fails when strength gives way."

"You will let me help you," said Annie, drying her eyes. "You will not hide from us again. You have done nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, you are the truest and noblest woman I ever knew."

The other shook her head sadly. "It cannot be," she answered. "I must go into hiding again, or all the past agony, the past struggle, would be in vain. The appointment I came to seek to-night must be given up at once. You tell me my—Mr. Lexley is doing duty in this very parish. I must escape without losing a moment. You see it yourself; there is no alternative."

Annie did see it herself, perhaps not without certain feelings of relief. Laura was a woman in a million, but, alas! she had a history, very much of a history, and while the wife of Cæsar should be above suspicion, the mistress of a school should be below and out of the way of it.

"But you must live," said the younger lady. "Do not be proud with me. Let me at least have the happiness of thinking I can make your hard lot a little less intolerable."

"Everybody can live who will work," answered Laura. "My dear, it is well for me, I *must* work, or I should go mad! There are plenty of things I can do. I daresay I shouldn't have made at all a good mistress for your school! I taught music for a long time before I went to live with Emily Dennison. I have tried to give music-lessons since I left my—my home. You would hardly believe how odd people are, how unkind, and how suspicious. Why had I discontinued the practice of tuition and what had I been doing in the interval? Had I, might I, would, could, or should I ever go on the stage? No references, indeed! It was too much to expect they should entrust the education of their children even in the matter of counting one, two, three, four, to a person (they didn't say a lady) of whose antecedents they were thus kept in ignorance. Even the few, who were tempted by my playing, which was tolerably good, and my terms, which were ridiculously low, managed to make the whole thing as uncomfortable as possible. Some never kept their appointments, some did not pay for their lessons, two or three ladies objected to my 'manner' —I suppose they were used to something very different—and one fat little man actually tried to make love to me! Still, I have managed to keep body and soul together, perhaps because I don't seem to care very much how soon they part company. It has only been since this last week I have found myself reduced to want. I have lost two pupils by scarlet fever, three more are gone into the country for good, and I have not one left. That is why I applied for the situation here. It's no use thinking about it now."

Annie's mind was wandering. She reflected on the unfortunate state of her purse, which usually

returned empty from her visits amongst her poor. She knew the other's character well enough to be sure they would meet no more, and read pretty clearly Laura's intention of changing her residence again and again, if necessary, so as to cut off every link with her past life. It vexed her to think how powerless she was. "What *can* I do?" she asked, fingering a handsome locket at her throat, the only ornament she wore—not because it was Aunt Emily's gift, but that Horace Maxwell once found and returned it to her, when it had been lost. "I am so sorry for you. I must do something."

After a lively discussion, during which the tallow candle nearly burned itself out, Laura consented to accept from Miss Dennison, whose good word as a female philanthropist already carried a certain weight, such a letter of recommendation, made out in an assumed name, as would induce any London physician to employ the bearer for a sick-nurse, that being an occupation to which Mrs. Laxton, as she wished to be called, seriously inclined, and her qualifications for which Annie, no mean practitioner in the same line, was able to judge.

"I can live, dear," said Laura, "and keep out of everybody's way, that is all I require. Don't think me ungrateful, but you will give me your solemn promise to respect my secret, won't you? And, Miss Dennison, Annie, dear Annie, we must never meet again."

"Not even by accident!" pleaded Annie, whose soft eyes were full of tears.

"Not even by accident," repeated the other, "though, indeed, in such a town as this, it would be by the merest accident. Since I came to London I have only met one person of my acquaintance, and that was Mr. Maxwell."

"I know it," said Annie, blushing; "I ought to have told you before. I saw you together."

Laura smiled. "It was our first meeting," said she, "and our last. I took care that it should be, and trusted his honour, as I now trust yours."

"Then, you don't know he has gone abroad?" said Annie, still with heightened colour.

"Abroad? No," said the other placidly. "So much the better. There are only two people left whom I have to avoid."

"Kiss me, dear," said Miss Dennison, and at that moment the tallow candle went out, so the two ladies having embraced in the dark, groped their way downstairs and into the street, hand-in-hand.

Then they parted; one returned in a cab to the bright warmth and joyous welcome of the house in South Kensington, the other slunk stealthily away to her sad, silent, squalid home.

Women's eyes are very sharp. Mrs. Pike, with a mite of humanity swathed in a shawl, resting on her arm, scarcely glanced at Miss Dennison running upstairs before she exclaimed, "Goodness gracious, Annie! What has become of your locket?"

"I've left it somewhere in the City," answered Annie calmly. "Never mind, dear; I'll wear the one you gave me instead."

CHAPTER XXVI

A FRIEND INDEED

"SISTER ANNE, sister Anne, d'ye see anyone coming?" sang Mrs. Pike in a clear treble, with a mischievous smile. "My dear, I don't wonder you are fidgety. I can't conceive anything so awkward. It makes me quite nervous to think of it."

The two ladies were sitting together in the pretty morning-room. It was an hour after breakfast; Poppy, Trix, and the dethroned baby were off for their morning exercise, the latter in a perambulator. His successor, the reigning despot, had lately taken sustenance, light, nutritious, but only partially digestible, and papa was at Woolwich; Annie, whose charitable engagements allowed her leisure till the afternoon, seemed unusually fidgety and nervous; she could not settle to any of her customary occupations, and walked a dozen times in five minutes to the boudoir window, which commanded indeed no more extensive prospect than two gas-lamps and a tree.

Therefore it was that Mrs. Pike expressed playful derision in the notes of that long-forgotten opera, which presented to our grandfathers the connubial atrocities and condign punishment of the uxorious Blue Beard.

"Let me look at it again," said the married lady.

"I can't make head or tail of it. If—mind, Annie, I only say *if*—he does mean to ask for a second chance, won't you give him one?"

For answer Miss Dennison tossed a note into her friend's lap; the latter opened, and read it out for the twentieth time—

"DEAR MISS DENNISON,—Can you favour me with an interview on a matter of some importance? I would call any day this week, at your own time. I hope you will not refuse to see me, because I believe the happiness of two people is involved in the communication I have to make.—Yours very sincerely, PERCY MORTIMER.

"A line to the Travellers will always find me."

"And what did you say in your line to the Travellers?" continued Mrs. Pike.

"I said yes."

"You said yes. My dear, you must have said something besides. You couldn't put 'yes' in an envelope, and send it to the Travellers, or any other club in London!"

Annie laughed.

"I said very little more. I told him I should be at home till one o'clock; it's five minutes past twelve now."

"And, Annie dear," continued her friend, "have you thought the matter over? Have you made up your mind what you will do?"

"That depends upon the communication!" replied Miss Dennison. "It's a long word and sounds pompous. Have you never observed, Lettie, that when gentlemen are really in earnest, they become either pompous or slangy?"

"That's not my experience," answered the other, running over her own little catalogue of admirers with a triumphant smile. "I used to find them more inclined to hesitate, I think, and to get lost. The man, too, that didn't care for one, always made himself so much pleasanter than the man that did. However, I am married and done for; it's no use talking about me. Annie, you see of course what this note means."

"What?"

"My dear, nothing can be plainer. Mr. Mortimer is really attached to you, and can't get over it. He has asked you once, and you said 'No,' like a goose! He has given you time to reflect, and now he means to try again. What is it Pope or Scott, or somebody, says, 'one refusal no rebuff.' He's quite right, and I like him for his pluck."

"Oh, Lettie, do you think so? I hope not!"

"I've no patience with you, my dear. Isn't he good enough?"

"Too good, much too good!"

"Rich enough? Clever enough? Nice enough?"

"Granted, granted, granted."

"And don't half the girls in London want to marry him? My dear, what possible objection can you find?"

"Here's only one. It's his name."

"Mortimer — Mortimer. What's the matter with his name?"

"It's pretty, I daresay, and aristocratic. Mrs. Mortimer sounds well; but, Lettie, he's not Mr. Wright!"

"Then there *is* a Mr. Wright!"

"Oh no, no!" replied Annie, blushing furiously,

and her friend saw well enough she was pleading Percy's cause in vain. A true woman, however, she fired a volley even in retreat.

"There may be as good fish in the sea, Annie, but I don't think you will ever catch one to suit you half as well. I am the last person to advocate anything but love-matches; the General always laughs at me for being romantic, but, at the same time, when everything is suitable, and there are plenty of means, and no previous attachment exists of course, I *do* think it makes a very little difference to a good-looking young couple, whether they fall in love after marriage or before."

"But suppose I couldn't fall in love with Mr. Mortimer at all!" urged Miss Dennison.

"That's nonsense!" replied her friend. "Here he comes. Let him speak for himself!"

Between the gas-lamps and the tree, Percy Mortimer's figure was at this moment seen to flit by, mounted on the perfect hack so coveted of London equestrians, and followed by a groom on a horse that, eager to overtake its stable-companion, displayed such form and action as caused all passers-by to turn round and admire.

Nobody could look less like a despondent swain, and though, as the upshot proved, he still cared deeply for Annie's welfare, his pulse beat no faster, his colour neither went nor came, when his name was announced, and Mrs. Pike's footman ushered him ceremoniously into the boudoir.

Annie did blush. She seemed to have caught the trick of blushing since last night. Shaking hands with her rejected suitor, she could find nothing better to say than this—

"I am glad to see you looking as if you were perfectly cured."

Mrs. Pike smothered a smile. Her greeting was unusually cordial, and something in her manner seemed to wish him success, but "She heard baby crying upstairs (though that atom had been asleep for hours), would Mr. Mortimer excuse her? Of course, Annie, you'll make him stay to luncheon."

The door shut, and the two looked at each other in silence.

"Your leg *is* better?" said Annie anxiously.

Percy burst out laughing. "*You* mended it," said he. "You ought to know. But I didn't call to talk about my leg, though it was an interesting topic once. Miss Dennison, were you surprised at my note?"

"Yes. No. That's to say, I thought you wouldn't be in town at this season," was the answer.

"You can guess why I want to see you, I dare-say," continued her visitor in such calm accents as, considering all things, seemed hardly flattering to the lady he had come to see.

Of course Annie "hadn't an idea." They never "have an idea." Though women can guess with such marvellous intuition, though they leap to conclusions with such startling rapidity, they never expect that for which they are waiting and longing, and wondering why it does not come!

"I can walk home as well without you as with you," I heard a damsel say to her swain only last night in the Vauxhall Road, but she held him fast by the arm nevertheless, and I have no doubt she made him accompany her every yard of the way to her own door.

"I told you I had something to say which affected the happiness of *two* people," proceeded Mr. Mortimer, smoothing his hat like a man who is going to propose. "You are one of them. Miss

Dennison, do you remember a question I asked you in the summer?"

"Now for it!" thought Annie; but she only nodded and held her breath.

"Your answer was hardly what I expected. I beg pardon, I ought to say what I hoped. But, Miss Dennison, a man does not ask a young lady such a question as that, unless he has the greatest esteem and regard for her, unless her happiness is as dear to him as his own."

"I'm sure you are very good and kind," faltered Annie, who dreaded a repetition of the proposal. "I'm sure nobody could have a better and truer friend."

"I hope I am a true friend," answered Percy; "that is my only excuse for interfering in so delicate a matter. Miss Dennison, what would you do if you saw somebody you valued going to the dogs as fast as he could drive?"

"Get between my friend and the dogs!" answered Annie. "Men do it for each other every day, and women would too, if they had the opportunity."

"There's an opportunity here," said Percy. "But I can't do much good single-handed. Miss Dennison, you know Maxwell, and what an old friend he is of mine."

Annie's heart leapt into her throat, she could not have spoken a word to save her life.

"He's going fast to the dogs—foreign dogs too, which makes it no better. I thought he wasn't like himself when he went away. You remember how cheery and careless he used to be, full of fun, full of chaff, full of good-humour. All at once he grew morose, desponding, miserable. I never saw a fellow so changed in my life. He looked like a

"Now, do you understand?"

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man who was going to cut somebody's throat, probably his own!"

Gall and honey! wormwood and treacle! Poor Horace! poor fellow! It was delightful to hear this, and yet it pierced her to the heart!

"I was glad to learn they sent him to Vienna. I thought the change might do him good; and if he was only unhappy about an attachment, unless it was really a case, of course he'd be all right in six weeks."

Annie bowed. "You speak by experience, I conclude," said she, and wished the next moment she could recall her words.

"I took longer," answered Mortimer. "But mine was an object very much above the common level. That is why I am so anxious about my friend. Miss Dennison, Horace Maxwell and myself hold the same opinions on many matters. We have the same tastes and pursuits; we admire the same characters. We were in love with the same woman. *Now*, do you understand?"

What right had he to tell her this? Why couldn't she feel angry? Why couldn't she keep down the rush of happiness that sent the blood tingling through her veins, and rushing crimson to her cheeks? Her silence, her embarrassment, could bear but one construction, and emboldened Percy to proceed. In relating the circumstance afterwards, he used to declare that when you got into your swing, it was almost as good fun playing the game for another fellow as for yourself, and less trouble if you win!

"But it does not appear," continued the gentleman, "that Vienna is at all a good place for patients who are afflicted with my friend's complaint. Dissipation is bad for it; smoking is bad for it;

gambling, extravagance, excitement of all kinds is bad for it; and I don't think fighting duels likely to do much good!"

"Duels!" gasped poor Annie.

"Well, I hope the duel was arranged without bloodshed. Indeed, I know it was, so perhaps I should not have mentioned it, but there *was* a duel impending ten days ago, and the worst of it is, that Horace put himself completely in the wrong. I hear from his friends, they cannot make him out—cannot think what has come over him. Unless something is done pretty soon, he'll be ruined. I've tried to get him recalled, but he swears nothing will induce him to return to England, and I don't know how to extricate him, unless I go and bring him back myself."

"Oh! *couldn't* you, Mr. Mortimer?" exclaimed Annie. "It would be so kind, so friendly, so generous, so like yourself!"

She was beginning to feel very pitiful, very anxious, very unhappy, regarding this wilful admirer, who, with a pigheadedness admirably masculine, seemed bent on destroying his own prospects, his own happiness, in order to distress the very person he loved best. Surely he alone was to blame, yet Annie could not but cherish certain self-reproaches on her own score. It was as if she had dropped a valuable piece of china and broken it.

"If I was sure of something," said Percy, "something that only one person in the world can assure me of, I need not go to Vienna; I need not go a step farther than Pall Mall. One line with a foreign stamp on the envelope would bring Horace Maxwell to London by the next mail. Miss Dennison, I once asked you a question for myself, and you said No. Don't say No again when I ask

a question for my friend. Miss Dennison, may I write that line?"

Annie looked helplessly at every object in the room, and finally fixed her eyes on the pattern of the carpet.

"What ought I to do, Mr. Mortimer?" she said. "It seems so odd to be put in such a position. You are a true friend to both of us, and I will take your advice. What ought I to do?"

"Do nothing!" answered Mortimer. "Talleyrand himself could not give you better counsel. Only answer me candidly, if Horace comes back, shall you be glad to see him?"

"*Very* glad," said the young lady, with her eyes still fixed on the carpet.

"Then I will undertake that he comes back in a week," said Mortimer, "without making you in any way responsible. Miss Dennison, you can believe that I am more sensitive for your pride than my own. I have given you the best possible proof. Now let us talk about something else. Thanks! I shall be delighted to stay luncheon. How's the new baby? I trust in Heaven they won't bring it down."

But at that moment the luncheon-bell rang, and the new baby's mamma made her appearance at the boudoir door. Taking in the situation with a glance, she could make nothing of it. As she told her friend afterwards, she never felt so puzzled in her life.

Percy's manner was perfectly cool, assured, and comfortable, as far removed from the elation of victory as from the forced hilarity a beaten man assumes to cover defeat. Nobody who had been accepted, could have asked a second time for roast chicken; nobody who had been refused could have

restricted himself to one glass of wine. Mrs. Pike would have been satisfied with the only remaining alternative, that possibly he had not proposed at all, but for a certain air of proprietorship with which Annie asked him for information concerning her own belongings, imperiously requiring the last news of Uncle John.

"I am not happy about Mr. Dennison," answered the visitor. "There's nothing to be frightened at, but he does not gather strength as he ought. This last illness has made him look much older, and though he is as pleasant and good-humoured as ever, his voice gets very weak, and he never left his arm-chair all the time I was in the room."

"That was yesterday," observed Annie, who seemed to know all about it.

"Yesterday afternoon," said Percy. "I told him I was coming here and should probably see you to-day. Of course he was full of messages. 'Tell her to keep something for St. James's,' he said, 'where a good example is more needed and more uncommon than in the parish of St. Giles. If Annie really takes these matters in hand, as I hear she does, tell her from me'—shall I tell you what he said?—no, I won't; it will make you vain!"

Mrs. Pike felt satisfied they were engaged, and if anything could have exalted the visitor in her good opinion, it would have been the ardent desire he expressed to see baby, having previously recovered possession of his hat, gloves, and riding-whip, with all appliances for escape. "You'll dine with us, of course, very soon," exclaimed his hospitable hostess as he took leave, while Annie actually followed into the hall to see him get on his horse. "The first day we're disengaged I'll

let you know. We'll have some pleasant people to meet you, though you won't care much about that!"

So, waving many farewells, Percy rode off into the Park, wondering what he had done to win such golden opinions from Mrs. Pike, but disposed on reflection to credit the advance he had obviously made in her good graces to the interest he affected in her youngest-born.

That was a pleasant ride. The priceless hack seemed to tread on air. Its owner, after one little pang of regret to have lost such a wife, qualified indeed by the opinion he had long entertained, that a wife was an unnecessary adjunct to a man who had everything else he wanted—after a little spasm of wounded vanity, to find it possible that any woman in the world, especially Annie Dennison, should prefer any man in the world, especially Horace Maxwell, to *him*, Percy Mortimer—after a little struggle, with the petty selfishness that cannot but encrust a nature wholly untried by sorrow or care, though doing that nature infinite credit, when, as in his case, it is only skin-deep, he felt that he had never been so happy in his life. The wintry sun was going down over Kensington Gardens in streaks of gold; the late frost had yielded to that genial change of atmosphere we call a thaw; the Ride felt soft and springy; the Park, though it was yet winter, swarmed with well-dressed people of both sexes, on foot and on horseback; one of the greatest men in Europe greeted him with a familiar nod, and a friend's child on a pony recognised him with a shout of delight.

"Hang it!" soliloquised Percy, putting "the priceless" into a gallop. "It's as good as sea-bathing! I'll make it a rule to do some fellow a

friendly turn every day of my life before I go out for a ride!"

"Well—Annie"—

"Well—Lettie"—

"You don't mean to say you've nothing to tell me!" exclaimed Mrs. Pike, as the tramp of Mortimer's horse died out in the street, and the two ladies found themselves again in the boudoir. "You've accepted him, of course."

Annie shook her head and laughed. "You certainly *are* the most tiresome girl in the world!" continued her friend. "I'm sure I can't think why I am so fond of you! And everybody else, for that matter. You can't expect a man to come and ask *three* times. What is it you do expect? Are you waiting for the Great Mogul?"

"Would it be any use, do you think?" asked Annie, who was evidently in the highest spirits.

"Or Prester John?" proceeded Mrs. Pike. "There *must* be a reason. Oh, Annie, Annie! there's a Mr. Wright after all!"

To this point-blank accusation, I am ashamed to confess, Miss Dennison returned an exceedingly evasive answer, fencing most unworthily and withholding the confidence her friend undoubtedly deserved.

"There isn't a man in London, there isn't a man in England," said she, "that I would walk across the room even to dance with. There, Lettie, are you satisfied *now*?"

But Lettie could see into a millstone as far as her neighbours, and enjoyed, moreover, as a married woman, this privilege of her coverture, that she got all the gossip of the clubs at second-hand on the connubial pillow. The General had not failed to comment on Horace Maxwell's ill-doings in

Vienna, nor to hazard drowsy surmises as to their cause.

"I have it!" exclaimed the elder lady, after a pause. "It's Horace Maxwell! Oh, Annie! I'm so sorry! He's good-for-nothing, and he'll break your heart!"

"He's not good-for-nothing!" replied Miss Dennison, firing up. "And you've no right to say so. Besides, Lettie," she added, in a softer tone, "don't you remember how kind he was when Trix had the whooping-cough in the spring?"

"He *was* nice about Trix," answered Mrs. Pike, mollified by the touching reminiscence. "Perhaps, after all, he's not so bad as I think. I know the General likes him. But, oh, Annie, I wish it was the other!"

Then they fell to talking of Uncle John, prognosticating no good results from the change of doctors insisted on by Aunt Emily, and deploring the feebleness of mind and body, which accepted this, as all other contrarieties, in good-humoured equanimity.

"Dear Uncle!" observed Annie, with a very grave face. "If Aunt Emily would only be a little more considerate, and not worry him while he is so ill."

"I wish I could bring him here!" replied energetic Mrs. Pike. "I always said that odious woman would be too much for him in the end!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RIGHT MAN

IT is hardly necessary to observe that Horace Maxwell's extravagances had been considerably exaggerated.

The gambling transactions resolved themselves, on inquiry, into a few late sittings at Three-card Loo (limited). The hard drinking was but a consumption of Bavarian beer in the "Folks-Garden." And although the story of the impending duel was so far true, that two good-natured Englishmen and an Austrian Colonel had found it difficult to arrange without bloodshed, a quarrel in which Horace showed less than his usual good temper and good sense, there seemed but one count of the indictment on which he could be fairly found guilty. There was no question that he smoked continually, and at unseasonable hours. In no other way had he offended beyond forgiveness; and Annie Dennison, though how she ascertained the truth is more than I can explain, experienced no little satisfaction in reflecting that his follies and misdemeanours had been confined exclusively to the society of his own sex.

The girl was very happy now, and looked so bright while she went about amongst her poor, that Mr. Franks felt more than ever convinced the

wings must be growing fast under her black dress, and would soon be strong enough to bear "our lady" away in a direct flight to those mysterious realms, for which he already began to entertain on his own account certain vague longings and aspirations, wholly unconnected with beer.

Annie stuck to her work unflinchingly. She neglected no school-hours, no vigils by the sick, no domiciliary visits, because Maxwell returned post-haste from Vienna, resolved to win her for his own, and lay at her feet with reckless generosity his prospects, none of the most encouraging, his happiness, already in her keeping, and himself, strange to say, the gift she valued most of all.

I have related how Miss Dennison refused an offer. In justice to her politeness, I must ask permission to describe the manner in which she accepted a proposal of the same nature.

Winter was giving way to Spring. Horace had been back nearly a month, and had not yet succeeded in finding an opportunity to unburden his mind in Miss Dennison's ear. It is difficult, except for very old campaigners, to make a declaration in the middle of dinner, during a rubber of whist, or while engaged in general conversation with half a dozen people round a drawing-room fire. Maxwell could perhaps have hinted at his feelings artfully enough if he had not *felt* them, but in presence of the woman he really loved, this accomplished diplomatist became confused, tongue-tied, positively dull.

He made great advances to Poppy, however, and I have reason to believe that young lady was much mortified by his subsequent defection.

He got desperate at last, and waylaid Miss Dennison one fine morning as she sallied forth in

the familiar black dress, with the basket on her arm.

They walked up Queen's Gate together, I cannot explain why; it is by no means the shortest way from South Kensington to Smithfield. Pacing the side pavements of that airy solitude, they must have felt as free from supervision as on a Highland moor or a Western prairie. Perhaps that was why Annie quickened her pace, and Horace found courage to announce this remarkable discovery, "It's quite early, Miss Dennison; nothing freshens one up so much as an early walk in London."

Annie could not but admit both statements.

"Don't be in such a hurry," continued the gentleman, gaining confidence from the sound of his own voice. "Mayn't I—mayn't I carry the basket?"

The lady demurred. In that basket were stowed many little articles of comfort for her sick poor: two fresh eggs, tea, sugar, a quarter of a pound of butter, and a couple of glass bottles, containing respectively, doctor's stuff to be swallowed, and doctor's stuff to be rubbed in.

A shake involving breakage in such a cargo would simply be destruction to the whole freight.

The owner of the basket grasped it firmly. The hand that wanted the basket closed round its handle, and ten fingers of opposite sexes got themselves so entwined over the basket, that unless somebody gave way its downfall was imminent and inevitable.

Horace yielded himself, rescue or no rescue.

"Miss Dennison," he faltered, "Annie, my own darling, may I carry your basket all my life?"

"If you'll put all your eggs in it, yes," answered

Annie boldly; and coming suddenly on a crossing-sweeper, the only living soul to be seen, a solemn silence intervened.

It was broken by the lady.

"You're not to speak another syllable now," she said. "You're to walk with me as far as the end, without opening your lips, and to put me in the first hansom cab we meet. I've got my day's work to do, and if I was ever so happy myself, it's no reason for neglecting the sick and the suffering."

"Then you *are* happy," replied Horace, walking quite close.

"I didn't say so. Don't look so down—Yes—I am very, *very* happy—not another word—there's a hansom, good-bye."

"And when shall I see you again?" asked the gentleman. Is it not always the last question a man asks who is parting from the woman he loves?

"Oh! very soon, I daresay," was the answer, while the cab-door shut with a bang.

"I shall come back the same way at four o'clock. Yes, I did. I loved you all the time."

If these last words were lost in the roll of wheels, it must have been the early rising and the walk that made Horace Maxwell look so pleased. The cabman winked and denoted approval by touching his horse up on the inside of the thigh. "It's a coortin' job," murmured this observer of human nature to a sprig of early green he wore in his mouth. "They mean workin' in double-'arness, do them two. I'll lay they'll step together like winkin'. They both looks so 'appy!"

They were happy, very happy. So the lady lowered her veil and cried, the gentleman went into Kensington Gardens and smoked.

It speaks well for Annie's self-command and high sense of duty that she in no way shortened any part of her daily round, nor allowed her attention to wander at any time to her own concerns. Only when she met Lexley, her heart smote her with pity while she contrasted his desolate life with the prospect that was opening for herself. Not without some little hesitation, she told him of her coming marriage, as they went out together from a house in which she had paid the last visit on her list.

"I thought it would be unkind that you should hear of it from anybody but me," she said timidly, though reassured by the calm eye and steady lip with which her intelligence was received. He, too, had learned the great lesson that it is no presumption to call divine, the great lesson that teaches humanity to merge its own sorrows, its own joys, its own existence, if need be, in the service of its Maker, and the welfare of its kind. When we remember the Teacher and His example, how can we be so backward in the task?

"You deserve to be happy," said Lexley. "And you *are* happy. God bless you, my dear Miss Dennison. You'll have a great many wedding-presents I daresay, but there will be a casket of hearty good wishes from this parish to out-value all the jewellery in Hunt and Roskell's window. You will wear them some day, when you are obliged to leave the gold and the diamonds behind."

How she longed to tell him all she knew of Laura. To satisfy that hunger of the heart, which she could read in every line of his worn, sad face. And yet she dared not. It would only add to his misery could he know the real truth. Then there

was her promise, given solemnly that night in the school-house, and, more perplexing still, her ignorance, even had she thought herself justified in divulging everything, of Laura's present abode!

She felt it nevertheless a great comfort that, owing to her own recommendations, the Mrs. Laxton whom she had befriended was at least beyond actual want. She had lately received a letter with no date, from that lady, couched in very grateful language, informing her that she was now in full employment as a sick-nurse, and giving unqualified satisfaction, chiefly, as Laura wrote, with something of her old decision, from the unflinching persistency with which she made her patients swallow every drop of the medicines prescribed to them. Two famous London doctors she said sent for her in their cases of greatest emergency. She had her hands full, and was—no—not happy, but resigned!

When she bade him good-bye, Annie's kind heart ached for her energetic coadjutor, her patient, sorrowing, and unselfish friend, but it was nearly four o'clock, and—and—Horace Maxwell had a right not to be disappointed now. Cab-horses were proverbially slow, this one seemed to have been carefully trained for a funeral, yet she arrived at the end of Queen's Gate a few minutes before four.

This did not much signify. Horace had been waiting there since a quarter past three!

There was much to be done in the next few days. A marriage in prospect seems to create in every family connected, more or less remotely, with the culprits, a total subversion of discipline and ordinary habits.

Friends must be written to diffusely, relations,

particularly uncles and aunts, respectfully apprised. Simple household decencies are disregarded, the servants go about on the broad grin, and there is much opening and shutting of doors.

Annie's engagement seemed no exception to the universal rule.

The General, to use his own expression, "rallied round her" from the first. No sooner was he informed of the important fact than he sallied forth, though it was already dusk, and returned with such a bracelet as was never before seen out of a jeweller's shop, representing three months' pay and allowances at least, gallantly kissing her hand while he clasped it round her wrist.

"If you don't make a good wife, my dear," said the General, "I'll never believe there's such a thing to be had for love or money; no, not if Lettie herself went down on her knees, and promised from this day forth never to insist on having her own way. He's a good fellow, and a lucky fellow, and he's got the nicest girl in Europe, and the sweetest-tempered and the prettiest and the best. Come here, Trix, put both your arms round Annie's neck and wish her joy!"

Mrs. Pike, too, though in her secret heart she still wished it was "the other one," could not withhold her good wishes, promising herself at the same time much gratification in driving her friend through the most crowded parts of London for selection of the trousseau.

"You must come and live near us," she said, "you dear thing, or my children will break their little hearts!"

But everybody was not so kind. After the first ebullitions of cordiality, people began to whisper and shake their heads and find fault.

"Miss Dennison wasn't so pretty by daylight. She had gone off sadly of late. To be sure, she had been out a good many seasons. Three was it? or four? And she wasn't such a catch after all. They had no faith in the old uncle. He couldn't be more than seventy-five at the outside—hale and strong—a very likely man, they should say, to marry again. Wasn't she oddish, too? What was all this Sister of Mercy business? And hadn't there been some queer story about a clergyman down in the country? She was good enough for Mr. Maxwell at anyrate! Wild as a hawk, my dear, and over head and ears in debt! Hadn't you heard, obliged to get him out of the way to Dresden, or Berlin, or somewhere, and she almost went out of her mind, and wrote imploring him to come back? One can hardly believe it, but she's just the kind of girl to do anything out of the common way. Percy Mortimer knows all about it. He's to be best man. She tried hard to marry *him*, but it wouldn't do with our friend Percy. We'll drop a card at Mrs. Pike's, my dear. What a bore it is people living such a long way off! Don't forget to turn the corner down, and if we are asked to the wedding I suppose we had better go!"

Nokes and Stokes sent conjointly a handsome locket, with a beautiful letter, the production of the latter, and were invited to attend the marriage accordingly.

But to face Aunt Emily was the ordeal Annie most dreaded. Mrs. Dennison had a happy facility of seeing things in a discouraging light, and never accorded her approval to any plan, idea, or arrangement she did not herself originate. Annie had wisely broken the ice in writing, and flattered herself she had so worded her letter that it could

not give offence. There was, however, an ominous cloud on Aunt Emily's brow when her niece went to call, and Mrs. Dennison's reception betrayed that she was in one of her worst humours.

Annie trembled, remembering Uncle John's maxim, "It's always best to give Emily plenty of rope when she's got her back up."

Offering her hand very coldly and speaking with compressed lips, the elder lady affected a distance of manner at once provoking and ridiculous.

"Won't you wish me joy, Aunt?" said Annie, coming bravely to the point, and eager to get it over.

"Congratulation without approval," replied the other severely, "is a mere mockery of goodwill. I hope for the best, and though I have never been consulted at any one stage of the whole proceedings, though I daresay I am considered a mere lay-figure and nonentity, you are my husband's brother's child, Annie Dennison, and I wish you well."

This was unsatisfactory, but to a certain extent unanswerable.

Annie could think of nothing better to say than, "Didn't it surprise you, Aunt?"

"Surprise me!" repeated Mrs. Dennison loftily; "nothing can surprise a person who has common experience in the folly and ingratitude of the world. I was grieved, Annie, and shocked, and—and disgusted, indeed, but not surprised."

Still the girl kept her temper. "I had hoped, Aunt, you would have spoken more kindly. I came here thinking you would congratulate me like other people. I have no mother, you know. Uncle John is my nearest relation on earth."

"Why don't you treat *me* like a mother?" asked Mrs. Dennison, who had never treated Annie nor anybody else like a daughter.

"And after all, Auntie dear," pursued the girl, ignoring the maternal question, "we met, and—and—began to like each other in your house, the dear old Priors! I shall be fonder of it than ever now."

"That was one of your Uncle's arrangements," answered Mrs. Dennison, thawing a little, but still many degrees below temperate. "If he had listened to me, all this might have been avoided. If he had taken my advice, which he never does, he would not be laid up on the ground floor now."

"How *is* Uncle John?" asked Annie, glad of the diversion, and really anxious to know. "Mr. Mortimer gave us a very poor account of him."

"Mr. Mortimer had better mind his own business," was the captious answer. "Bolus was doing no good. I never had the slightest confidence in Bolus, so I sent for Gripes. He thinks your Uncle is mending, and so do I; but you know what a bad patient he is, takes no care of himself, and cannot be induced to do anything he is told,—one would think he *liked* to be ill for sheer obstinacy."

"May I go and see him, Aunt?" said Annie, not averse to concluding the interview, and permission being granted, though somewhat churlishly, Miss Dennison proceeded downstairs, through certain well-known passages, to a gloomy apartment in the back settlements which Uncle John was pleased to term his "snuggery."

"Come in," said the kind voice in answer to her knock, and the kind face lifting itself from the cushions amongst which it rested, greeted her with the old pleasant smile she knew so well and loved so dearly.

"God bless you, dear," said her Uncle; "I've

heard all about you. Good news travels fast. I think you've chosen well, and I am sure he will make you happy."

Annie crossed over to the invalid on his sofa, and kissed his fine old forehead with her eyes as full as her heart.

He was sadly, cruelly changed. The manly figure had drooped and shrunken by a span, the high features were worn and attenuated to an unnatural delicacy, and in the patient eyes lurked that strange, wan lustre which once seen can never be mistaken, pale and dim, yet shining as though it had been kindled beforehand, to light the wayfarer through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

"Oh, Uncle, Uncle dear!" said Annie, pressing his head with both hands to her breast, "you're getting better. Surely you're getting better; this new man must be doing you good."

I need scarcely say that Mr. Dennison's was not only a kind but a courageous nature. Of his own failing health, none could be so well aware as himself. When Bolus thought it would be "more satisfactory" to have further advice, and suggested a consultation with Gripes, Mr. Dennison sent for his lawyer, and lost no time in making such dispositions as would cause the least possible inconvenience to those he left behind him after his death. Uncle John had never been one of those men who live in this world as if it was to last for ever. While he accepted its pleasures with exceeding thankfulness and great moderation, its pains with a cheerful philosophy, fully as much the offspring of temperament as of religion, he looked forward with the confidence of a Christian to that future of which the heathen philosopher had but a vague and misty conception, when he announced the *spatium*

extremum vitæ, the close of life's turmoil, to be of all Nature's gifts the wisest and the best.

To say that he did not fear death, would be to say that he was not human; but if there were no fear, there would be no courage; and while he dreaded he could yet confront the Inevitable, calmly, resolutely, and with unselfish foresight as to how it would affect others besides himself.

To Gripes he had made a clean breast of it on this very matter of his niece's marriage.

"How long d'ye give me, doctor?" he asked, cheerfully, pleasantly, and with no more anxiety than is shown by an old soldier when warned he will be in action in ten minutes. "Six weeks will do it, or even five!"

Gripes was shocked; the question seemed so indecorous, so unprofessional. He shook his head, and took refuge in some long words, concluding with a panegyric on Mr. Dennison's "splendid constitution," at which that gentleman, conscious it had broken down rather prematurely, only smiled.

"It would be very inconvenient for us all if the wedding had to be put off," continued Uncle John, taking an impartial and characteristic view of the whole matter; "my niece is the best girl in Europe, and I should like to see her happily settled before I go somewhere else. If the resources of medicine or of surgery can give me, say a month's reprieve, doctor, go to work at once. I'll do everything you order, and submit to anything you propose."

Thus urged, Gripes conceded that "there was no immediate danger," pocketed his fee, and took his leave, very glad to get away.

"The new man is as wise as a serpent," said her uncle, in reply to Annie's anxious and affectionate inquiry, "but he can't grind old people young. Now

tell me all about it, my pretty Annie. It began at the dear old Priors, and he won your foolish heart by riding Barmecide so well the day after the frost. Ah! the young horse will carry him better next season," continued Uncle John, reverting to a certain codicil of his will, not without a little pang to think that Barmecide's master would never see the tawny woods, the dripping fences, the lush November pastures, and the bloom on the gorse again! "And, Annie dear, I hope you and your husband will keep your Christmas at the old house whatever happens. So he came back from Vienna, neglecting the interests of his country, and proposed without delay. My dear, I give you joy with all my heart! A white dress and a wreath, instead of the black gown and the basket. A good exchange, too. Now tell me, dear, hasn't he asked you how long it will take to get your clothes made?"

"Oh, Uncle!" protested Miss Dennison, with a blush.

"I'm to give you your trousseau, you know that's a very old agreement. Now, Annie, will you do me a favour?"

"Of course I will,' was the irrepressible answer. "I'll do anything in the world you ask me. Oh! Uncle, I won't be married at all unless you are really better."

"I *am* better," he replied, with a feeble smile. "No thanks to Bolus, though—I hope Emily wasn't rude to him about the other man. But the favour is this, I can manage the lawyers, but you must hurry the dressmakers, stay-makers, bonnet-makers, cake-makers, all the people we can't do without. I should like, dear, if it could be arranged, for the wedding to take place in less than three weeks. We'll have the breakfast here, of course."

Annie shot a wistful glance at the kind, worn face,—a sad suspicion cut her to the heart.

"Uncle, dear Uncle," she murmured, "Horace and I would much rather wait till you are better."

"It's too long to put it off, Annie," answered Uncle John quietly. "If I wasn't tired, I could repeat you half a dozen proverbs to that effect. No, no, my dear, Thursday fortnight at the latest. If Gripes is worth his salt, he ought to bring me to the post in good enough form to give you away; but I won't answer for either of us a week later. Do as I tell you, dear, and good-bye."

"But you'll promise to get better," persisted Annie, with another hearty hug.

"Yes, yes, dear," replied the invalid; "when I begin to get better, I shall be quite well!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BEST MAN

"THE blue coat, of course!" exclaimed Percy Mortimer, for the first time in his life showing a tendency to fidget. "What fools servants are! Who ever heard of going to a wedding in a black frock-coat?" Then he got himself up with exceeding care in gaudy colours, white gloves, and a resplendent tie. Though he was not the bridegroom, and even now this reflection sometimes gave him a little twinge, he at least looked the character from top to toe, causing Horace Maxwell, whom he carried to church with him, as in duty bound, to appear quite dowdy by comparison.

"Why, Percy!" exclaimed the latter, overwhelmed with the splendour of his Best Man, "you *have* done it to-day. Happily it's too late for the bride to change her mind, but I wouldn't give much for your chance among the bridesmaids."

"I'm in love with Poppy, and engaged to Trix," answered Mr. Mortimer. "The others I don't know, so make your mind easy about me. How d'ye find yourself, old fellow—could you eat any breakfast—have you had a B. and S.—don't you feel in a funk—are your hands cold—and haven't you forgotten the ring?"

"It's not a thing to chaff about," replied his principal gravely, "particularly for a man who has

never done it himself. I say, Percy, which side of the parson ought I to stand, and does it make any difference being married by a bishop?"

The discussion arising from these abstract questions brought them to the church door, at which a crowd had already gathered, who passed their opinions freely on the two gentlemen, canvassing the exterior of each in turn as the possible bridegroom, till set right by a ragged urchin of thirteen, who, pointing him out with an exceedingly dirty hand, thus identified the real culprit—

"That's 'im as is a-goin' to be tied up. Cracky! von't he catch it from his missis ven she takes 'im 'ome!"

The roar occasioned by the little villain's sally was lost in the tramp of advancing feet, for at this juncture more than two hundred of Annie's Smithfield and water-side friends made their appearance, to line the street in her honour on each side of the church door, every man of them sober and smiling, with his face washed, and his Sunday coat on. Was there ever a wedding without tears? They rushed to Annie's eyes more than once to-day, but never so freely as when those honest hearts set up their shouts of congratulation, loud as she went in a bride, louder as she came out a wife.

The ceremony was touching and imposing. A bishop in lawn sleeves stood on one side the altar, and Lexley, looking very tall in his canonicals, on the other. Uncle John, notwithstanding his own courage and his doctor's skill, felt unable to reach the church, but hoped to attend the breakfast at his own house in Guelph Street. His place was filled by the General, who gave the bride away, and who could not have looked more martial had he appeared in review order with all his decorations on. Mrs. Pike, a vision of tulle, laces, jessamine, smiles and tears, pervaded the vestry, the chancel, the nave,

and, indeed, the whole sacred edifice, while the six bridesmaids, big and little, behaved with a demure composure beyond all praise. Poppy showed herself a model of decorum, but poor little Trix, holding fast by her sister's hand, never took her eyes off the bishop, whom, by some inexplicable process of her young mind, she connected with her terror at the Zoological. Fixing on him a fascinated gaze of wonder and aversion, I fear the little maid passed a very unpleasant half-hour.

"Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" What a responsibility! What a venture! Who can tell whether that which seems ordained of Heaven to ensure the greatest human happiness shall not turn out a daily sorrow, a secret canker, or a life-long shame—a thing to make the best of rather than to enjoy, not a blessing to be cherished, but a burden to be endured? Nevertheless, blessing or burden, penance or indulgence, no doubt a loving dispensation through which Mercy draws her children to look upward from things of earth to things of heaven.

The General entertained no sinister forebodings, feared no responsibility on his own account, or that of anyone else. He gave his young lady away with so cordial a push as nearly sent her bodily into the arms of her bridegroom, folding his own thereafter with an air of consummate dignity and satisfaction. Poppy looked at papa in admiration, Trix still held the bishop in her eye.

Aunt Emily, gorgeously attired, thought proper to be exceedingly lachrymose and uncomfortable, assuming a saddened air of forgiveness and resignation, intended to imply that her own married life had been one of unexampled oppression, forbearance, and long-suffering, though, except in so far as she had made it unpleasant to one of the kindest-hearted and best-tempered of men, a less eventful existence

could hardly be imagined. The rest of the company lounged, yawned, held their prayer-books upside down, followed the pew-opener about with their eyes, and seemed glad when the ceremony was over. Stokes, who with his comrade had come up from Middleton by the morning train, whispered to Nokes, "I suppose they'll give us some grub the instant this thing is over?" and Nokes replied oracularly, "Immediately, if not before."

And now the ring is on, the blessing pronounced, the exhortation read, and the bride walks into the vestry, no longer Annie Dennison, but Mrs. Horace Maxwell.

Whispers, smiles, hand-shakings, laughter, a drying of eyes, and a confusion of tongues. Names are signed in an ominous business-like volume; there is a vast deal of fluttering about, especially amongst the bridesmaids. Aunt Emily affronts two of the bridegroom's aunts at a blow, by taking one for the other and being rude to both. The bishop looks on with approval, tempered by experience and the conscious superiority of a man who pulls the wires. Lexley, with a muttered prayer for her happiness, presses Annie's hand once more, and makes his escape. There is a pause, a silence, one of Poppy's white satin shoes comes off, creating a diversion, during which the clerk enters, looks about him mysteriously, whispers to Percy Mortimer, and the party dissolves.

The last-named gentleman, who is of an observant nature, does not fail to notice two remarkable facts. The only person who seems thoroughly master of the situation is the clerk aforesaid, while there is but one individual in the company more at a loss and out of his element than he feels himself, namely, the bridegroom. Percy comes to the conclusion that there is one part at a wedding even more embarrassing to fill than that of Best Man!

People seem much easier in mind and manners when they find themselves crowding Aunt Emily's two large drawing-rooms in Guelph Street, with wedding-favours on their breasts, a line of carriages at the door, and a German band playing pathetic strains in excellent time, but a little out of tune, under the windows. The party has received an accession of strength in several fresh arrivals, who throng the spacious apartments, and make the earlier guests feel comparatively at home. Annie has a little court of her own, so has Uncle John. The two courts join when the bride, crossing to the invalid's chair, stoops her fair young face, crowned by its marriage wreath, to lay a kiss upon the good old brow, which is already stamped with the seal of death.

What a contrast! The girl, in all the flush and sparkle of her beauty, entering on the duties and joys of womanhood, hopeful, triumphant, loving and beloved. The old man, worn, feeble, exhausted, looking back along the path he has travelled, wondering how short a distance it seems, finding little to exult in, less to regret, and while he rejoices in her joy, chiefly concerned for her sake, because that joy must soon be damped by tidings of his own release.

Which is to be envied of the two? I think I know. She has her work before her. He has done his. She is beginning the ascent of life. He is standing on the threshold of heaven.

"Dear Mr. Dennison looks so much better," says everybody. "And have you seen what a beautiful dressing-case he has given the bride?" But Aunt Emily, perhaps because she naturally runs counter to the general opinion, feels alarmed to-day for the first time. She begins to realise how lonely she will be without him, and to think she might have been kinder when he was here.

Annie's presents afford a fertile topic of conver-

'The bride . . . stoops her fair young face

sation. They comprise every kind of article, useful, ornamental, and the reverse. She herself points out with exceeding pride a tea-kettle of hideous shape and gigantic dimensions, presented by her friends at the East End of London. No subscriber has been allowed to contribute more than a penny towards this testimonial, and the bride relates an anecdote with much gratification, and some humour, of a little crossing-sweeper whom she found weeping bitterly because one half his munificent offering of twopence had been summarily rejected.

"How well she looks! How well she carries it off?" says everybody to everybody else. "Not the least put out, not the least shy. Where are they going to live? And where do they spend the honeymoon?"

But breakfast is already served. She takes her place by her new husband, like a king and queen on Twelfth Night, opposite half a ton of wedding-cake, and people sit down to a serious meal, beginning with soup and fish, at one o'clock in the day.

Uncle John, by help of a stick and General Pike's arm, totters across the room.

"Hold up, old man!" says the General gaily, but his heart aches to feel how heavily the wasted frame leans on his own strong limb. "This is one of your bad days, I am afraid. Go and rest, like a wise man, directly the parade is dismissed. I'll take all the heavy business off your hands."

"You'll stay in town till the end of the week," is Uncle John's rejoinder. "If I send over, I shall be sure to find you?"

"Find me!" echoes the General, in a voice that reaches Mrs. Pike at the other end of the table. "I wouldn't go out of town if the Queen sent for me to Osborne; you know that well enough! Keep your heart up, John," he adds, in a lower tone, "it may not be so bad as you think."

His friend only presses his hand, but the two old comrades understand each other, and the General's voice is very husky, while he urges the lady next him, not unsuccessfully, to venture on a glass of champagne.

If we only knew it, the Death's-head is surely present at all our feasts. Why do we persist in treating him like a poor relation, whom we cannot utterly ignore, but acknowledge distantly, unwillingly, and with a cold shoulder? Ought we not rather to consider him as our own best friend, certainly as the benefactor of our heirs and assignees? The old Scandinavians, like the modern Irish, made great rejoicings at the demise of their heroes, "waking" them with lavish hospitality and the consumption of much strong liquor. They thought well, also, to slay the favourite horse of the deceased, that he might not find himself dismounted in the world of spirits; and occasionally, we are told, cut the throats of a few intimate friends, lest he should feel lonely, just at first, amongst strangers; but the prevailing sentiment seems to have been one of congratulation, rather than condolence, on the emancipation of an aspiring soul from its tenement of clay. Why should we who are Christians, and hope for a better future than the halls of Odin and their draughts of mead out of foemen's skulls, shrink with something of indignation from any allusion to our latter end? Why, when those we love have gone before to heaven, should we bewail ourselves, refusing to be comforted? Why, when the inevitable pursuer has overtaken those we do not care for, should we assume grave faces, deep mourning, and debar ourselves from all innocent recreations enjoyed openly before the world, in favour of pleasures, equally innocent of course, that can be snatched in secret?

I should like to ask the bishop this question, but the bishop is busy with a tender cutlet and a tough old lady, who is making fierce love to him. Also he is somewhat exercised in his mind concerning Mr. Lexley, whose character he highly approves, whose good works have reached his ears, and whose energy he thinks he could turn to account in his own diocese. Besides all this he is calculating how soon the feast will be over, and when he can get his carriage, for the time of this spiritual lord is fully occupied, and long before he lays his head on his pillow he will have earned his night's rest as honestly as any day-labourer who carries a pickaxe or a hod.

It is therefore with a sensation of relief that the Right Rev. father hears a gentleman deliver himself, with much hesitation and tautology, of certain far-fetched metaphors and intricate sentences that resolve themselves into the health of the bride and bridegroom. The bishop, who could have said it all much better in ten words of good English, does honour to the toast by a sip of champagne, and sees some hope of release.

And now people begin to look at each other, wondering whether their faces are as flushed as their neighbours', and if there is to be more speechifying. Stokes now electrifies the company by the eloquence with which he adjures them to drink the health of the bridesmaids; and Nokes, to the intense dismay of that gallant officer, is called on to return thanks. Everybody seems to expect amusement from his embarrassment. Percy Mortimer glances at his principal, and the bridegroom, perfectly happy no doubt at heart, though much depressed in spirits, returns a gloomy smile. Nokes rises, overwhelmed with confusion, but full of pluck. Fixing his gaze on the largest and whitest and

nakedest of the Cupids that adorn the wedding-cake, he remains speechless for a moment to collect his thoughts. Presently he gets as far as "Ladies and Gentlemen"—a pause—"Ladies and Gentlemen" —another pause—Bravo! Go it Nokes!—"I rise on behalf of the bridesmaids to return thanks for their health. I am a bad hand at speaking; I wish I wasn't, but it makes little matter, because"—here he deserted the Cupid, and stared so hard at Trix as to frighten her exceedingly—"because, when the right time comes, and the right man, I am sure each of them will be quite able to speak for herself!"

Thunders of applause, with an audible "Very good indeed" from the bishop, who rises from table and sets the example of a move.

It is needless to observe that Nokes was warmly congratulated on the success of this his first attempt at oratory the same evening in the smoking-room of his club. He bore his honours meekly, confiding to his intimates the terror that possessed him, even in the moment of triumph. "There must have been a hundred people!" he said with the utmost gravity, "and more than half of them women. I tell you I was in a blue funk!"

So the bride disappeared to reappear in a spick-and-span new travelling-dress, the carriage was at the door, the farewells were said, the crowd stood expectant, Percy Mortimer pervaded the stairs with satin shoes in his hands, and Annie had reached the first landing, when she ran back once more to kiss the kind old man who, ever since she could remember, had been to her in the place of a father.

"Horace, darling," she whispered to her husband as they rolled out of London on the Uxbridge Road, "something is going to happen, I know. When I wished Uncle John good-bye for the last time his face was like the face of an angel!"

CHAPTER XXIX

RELEASED

RS. DENNISON bade her guests farewell with more courtesy than usual. People remembered afterwards that her manner had seemed strangely softened and subdued. Then she went to her own room, took out a book of prayers, and knelt upon her knees. The housemaid found her, an hour afterwards, listening at her husband's door, unwilling to disturb him lest he should be asleep. "I do believe missis was crying," said the woman, and such a display of weakness on the part of one whom they considered a character of adamant, created much consternation in the world below stairs. Then she ordered the carriage, and drove off with no fixed purpose of consulting him, but with some vague hope of catching Dr. Gripes at his own residence. It is needless to say that eminent man was earning his guineas at the other end of the town, but Mrs. Dennison felt anxious, uneasy, perhaps a little remorseful, and could not rest.

Too late, she saw how completely, for more than half a lifetime, she had ignored and thrown away the comfort at least, if not the happiness she might

have enjoyed, visiting on the kindly nature that was linked to hers those petty vexations for which it was in no way answerable; that constant irritation which sprang from her own morbid temperament and unemployed mind. She would have worked for him in the fields, and welcome, had she not been born a lady, and under such necessity would probably have been a healthier and a happier woman. She would have endured privation for his sake cheerfully enough, and was indeed capable of making any sacrifice on his behalf, except the indulgence of bitter words in which to couch unkind and unworthy thoughts. All this seemed to dawn on her now for the first time, when it was too late.

Oh, if we could but speak with them across the narrow river! If we could but make those shadows hear, yonder where they flit vaguely through the gloom on the other bank, telling them how we loved them, though they never knew it, though we never knew it ourselves till we came home and saw the empty chair by the fire, the picture with its face turned to the wall. But no; they waver and pass before our eyes, cold, cruel, insensible, pitiless surely of our anguish, and careless of our remorse. In the stillness of their rest, have they even spared a thought for our desolation? have they ever joined their entreaties to ours, when we prayed our hearts out that they might visit us once again?

If they could only come back, were it but for a day, an hour, we would be so fond, so patient, so forbearing; never again should they have cause to doubt the love that is straining even now to reach them beyond the grave!

It was nearly dusk when Aunt Emily returned

from her drive, and again visited her husband's room. He was extended on the sofa in the same attitude as if he had not moved a limb since she left him, and, though in the fading light she could not detect any great change on his face, there was something sadly ominous in the weak tones that welcomed her return.

"Is that you, Emily?" said the failing voice. "I am glad you went out in the carriage, the fresh air will do you good, and, Emily, I am glad you have not stayed away very long."

"Are you really glad to have me with you?" faltered Mrs. Dennison, lifting her husband's wasted hand to her lips and bursting into tears. "Oh, John, you're worse to-night! I've been to the doctor's. I left word he was to come here the moment he got home."

Uncle John shook his head. "You've tried to do all you can, I am quite sure," said he, "and Gripes has tried to do all he *can't*. I don't like keeping the servants out of bed, but one must stay up to-night in case I want to send a note or message. Come and sit here. I can hardly see you, it's so dark, and my eyes are getting so dim. How did you think the wedding went off? Didn't Annie look well?"

But Mrs. Dennison had no interest to spare for Annie or the wedding.

"John," she murmured, "I've something to say to you; only you seem so weak and ill I am almost afraid."

"Say it, my dear," was the answer; "perhaps this time to-morrow I shall not be able to listen."

She kept her tears down, holding him tight by the hand.

"John," she whispered, "I have thought a great deal about you and me lately. I might have made

you a much better wife. I see it now as I never saw it before; that we haven't been happier together has been my fault."

"*I've* been happy enough!" answered kind Uncle John. "Far happier than I deserved. A little tiff now and then means nothing, and a quick temper is very different from a bad heart."

He was not thinking, though she was, of days and weeks spent in sullen estrangement, of sarcasm before equals and rebuke before inferiors, of outrage offered by feminine violence and insult pointed by feminine ingenuity, that could therefore neither be resented nor returned. He had forgiven one offence after another almost as soon as committed, and the offender, thinking it all over now, would have washed them out willingly in her blood!

"John," she continued, in a choking voice, "I am afraid you would have been happier with anybody than with me!"

There was too little light to detect it on his features, but something of the old quaint humour vibrated in his tone, while he replied—

"Never think it, dear! Haven't I often told you that I am convinced, if we only knew it, one fellow's wife is just as tiresome as another fellow's? And the same rule applies to husbands, you may be sure. No, my dear, we didn't jog on so badly after all."

"But we'll jog on much better in future," exclaimed his wife, smiling through her tears, and Uncle John, characteristically unwilling to damp so comforting an anticipation, was glad that in the increasing darkness she could not see his face.

He knew the end drew very near, knew that it was now a mere question of how long his strength would hold out, as he groped feebly under the sofa

cushions for a note he had written two days ago, while his fingers could hold a pen, and that he kept by him to be sent off in his extremity, to the oldest friend he had in the world.

It was addressed "Major-General Pike," and consisted of but two lines, summoning that officer to come and see the writer "through it, like a staunch old comrade as he was!"

When Gripes arrived, which he did sooner than might have been expected, raising a question whereon we need not now enter, namely, "When do doctors dine?" he ordered his patient to be put to bed at once. That he thought ill of the case I gather from his subsequent proceedings, rather than from the conversation he held with Mrs. Dennison in the back drawing-room, looking bare and comfortless after its reception of company for the wedding-breakfast. To her eager inquiries, he returned answers that, if unsatisfactory, were scarcely alarming. "He should not change the medicine," he said. "Their patient was very composed and tranquil. But for great prostration, there seemed no immediate danger. Mrs. Dennison had better endeavour to get some rest, at anyrate during the first portion of the night. He would send in a nurse she might thoroughly depend upon—and—that was all he could do at present. He would look in the first thing to-morrow morning, of course."

But directly he got home, he despatched his own servant in a cab with the following missive :—

"Mrs. Laxton,—Please accompany the bearer at once, to watch a case requiring the greatest care. You shall be relieved to-morrow morning. Immediate. *Very critical.*

"Archibald Gripes."

Then he attacked a warmed-up cutlet that had been ready since seven, bolting it much faster than he would have allowed a patient to eat, swallowed two glasses of the best sherry in London, and was off again with a tired coachman and a fresh pair of horses, to launch on society a little marquis, who came squalling into the cold as befits equally the tattered beggar's brat and him whom the *ardens purpura vestit.*

Nobody works so hard as a clever doctor during the day. Nobody, not even a good clergyman, ought to lie down with more self-satisfaction at night.

Laura, too, had found by this time, that to be busy was at least to dull the shafts of memory, and baffle the attacks of regret. With Annie Dennison's recommendation, she had gained her footing in a line of business that seemed especially fitted for her peculiar faculties and disposition. She was so quiet, so courageous, so imperturbable; invincible by fatigue, not sensitive to a sufferer's pangs, clear-headed, firm, and an unflinching disciplinarian. The first doctor who employed her vowed he had discovered a treasure, and she soon found herself with "her hands full," as she expressed it, "and money in both pockets."

She lived in a neat and comfortable apartment now, containing for its only ornament the engraving of a church bearing some fancied resemblance nobody else could have detected to that in which Lexley used to officiate in the days that were gone like a dream. She had hopes, however, of soon purchasing a pianoforte. So she must have been easier than heretofore, both in mind and circumstances. She had come home for supper and bed when the doctor's servant arrived with his imperative

message, but there was no time to be lost, so cutting a slice from the loaf, she drank a glass of fair water, washed her face and hands, smoothed the beautiful brown hair, and putting on a pair of fresh gloves, announced herself ready to depart. Laura's glances, though far-seeing as a hawk's, wore that soft, bewildering expression we so often observe in eyes of defective vision, and she had a way of looking at people as if she saw miles beyond them, not without its effect. The doctor's servant, coming under the range of those deep grey orbs, felt this was quite an unusual specimen of a sick-nurse, and although he was a man of considerable presence and self-esteem, who would have accosted an archbishop without the slightest diffidence, the small-talk with which he intended to beguile their drive in the cab froze into respectful silence on his lips.

Laura was so accustomed to expeditions of a like nature that till the vehicle drew up at the well-known door in Guelph Street, she had not given a thought to the identity of the patient she was summoned to attend. In her mind the individual was wholly merged in the case—"immediate and critical"—but now before the very portals of a house that had been almost *home*, the difficulty of her position flashed upon her at a glance. To be recognised was to undo all that she had effected through sufferings and sacrifices she alone could realise. To be recognised was to unite once more the link it had cost her so much to sever, at the penalty of exposing Lexley to the shame she had been breaking her heart to screen him from. But he would hear of her. He was in London. Perhaps she might even see him! Besides, there was human life at stake. It was too late to go back now, and while these considerations chased each other through

her brain, the cab drove off, and she found herself following a sleepy, sorrowful servant with noiseless footsteps towards the death-chamber of Uncle John.

Walking softly to his bedside, and peering through the curtains, her experience did not fail to tell her that human aid was too late, that human care could be of no avail. Laura had been present at enough deathbeds to recognise most of those forms in which the pitying Angel comes with his bond of acquittance and release. She could not mistake the dim but earnest eye, the fallen cheek, the parted lips, the involuntary movement of the wasted hand that lay outside the counterpane; above all, the placid consciousness of approaching rest stealing down like a mist over the pale face, forerunner of that perfect peace which would stamp it with the seal of immortality before to-morrow's dawn should brighten into day.

It was all over with Uncle John in this world. She could have cried, but that tears were so useless and unprofessional.

She need not have feared recognition, even without the thick veil falling from the bonnet she would not therefore remove. The servant left her without a sign that betrayed he had ever seen her in his life. Aunt Emily, who went to lie down three hours before, had not been disturbed, by her dying husband's express desire. The only other watcher was an elderly man who sat by the bedside, with his face buried in his hands, denoting by his attitude that he struggled fiercely against emotion, and kept it down.

In the trenches at Sebastopol, on the hard-fought fields of the Crimea, through the sweltering marches and rapid combinations of the Mutiny, Pike had seen many an honest fellow perish of fever in

camp, or go down by a soldier's death in the field. He had been little impressed with their fate, perhaps because at any moment it might be his own. Sturdy, uncompromising, rough in manner, blunt of speech, and stern even to severity in matters of discipline, he might have been thought, on service, a man devoid of feeling; but the General was not on service now, and sitting by his old friend's deathbed, no woman's heart could have been sorer than the brave old soldier's, no woman's tears could have been more difficult to keep back. Were they not schoolfellows at Eton, subalterns in the same regiment, sworn friends in many a perilous adventure, many a venial scrape? Had they not pulled each other through every kind of difficulty, from a tired horse in a ditch to a scheming harpy in a ball dress, from an empty cartridge-case to a protested bill? And must he sit there idle, and watch John Dennison drifting gradually, surely, silently out to the dark sea, nor move a finger to help him at his need? It vexed him. It angered him. He lifted his head with an impatient gesture, and would have risen to vent some of his irritation on the nurse, but that the dying man's eyes travelled round to his face, and the poor pale hand, once so strong on an oar, so light on a bridle, fell like a leaf on his arm.

"Don't go," said Uncle John in a calm voice, though very weak and low; "I shall not be long about it, but you must stay for the finish. I can't do without you, dear old friend, when we come to the run-in!"

"Is there no hope?" gasped the General, in a hoarse, thick whisper. "Dear old man! You were always the pluckiest fellow in the regiment! Can't you harden your heart, just for one more spurt, and get over it?"

Uncle John smiled feebly. "I shall get over it," he said; "but it will be to reach the other side. What is it after all, old friend? I am only going on a little in advance. You will follow long before you have forgotten me, and we shall meet again."

"I trust in the Lord we may!" responded the General, and I am afraid he muttered below his breath, "It's d——d hard lines if we don't."

"You'll get there, never fear," continued the dying man with a bright smile. "You know how, and you know why they let such poor black sheep as you and me in, if we only hope, and try, and pray to do better. I say, old fellow, you'll often think of me, won't you? After a good run sometimes, and on fine soft spring mornings, riding to covert."

The General made no answer. There was a lump in his throat, and his eyes were full of tears.

"I've left you Magnate. I hope you'll have many a good day out of him. I remembered you liked the horse when you bought him for me. Put a light bridle in his mouth, and he'll never turn his head. There was something else I wanted to say. Yes, I have it. Keep an eye on that boy Perigord, when he goes into the army. They've sent him to Germany to be coached. It's a good lad, but wildish. Look after him a little for my sake."

The other protested that he would keep as tight a hand on the youth as if he were his own son.

"You're one of my executors," continued Dennison. "You've not forgotten it, I daresay. There are some poor old folks at the Priors we mustn't leave to starve. I've provided for that, but any time you are down at Middleton go over and say a kind word to them from me. They like that sort of thing, and it does them good. I've left

Emily very comfortable. You'll have no trouble with the lawyers, but I can trust you, I know, to make everything as easy for her as possible. Emily has always been used to having things her own way. This is a long story — like one of old Marchare's after mess. I don't know if you're tired, I am. Who's that in the room?"

"Only the nurse," answered Pike. "Somebody Gripes sent in."

"Gripes is a good judge," replied Uncle John, in so strong a voice as would have been more encouraging but for the faint whisper to which it immediately fell. "He saw it was all up this evening. Tell her to wait in the next room; and make them bring her some tea or whatever she likes. It must be dull work for her, poor thing! It's not a very lively job for you!"

The General made no answer. His face was turned away. He was ashamed to let his old friend see how completely he had broken down.

In fainter accents, and with obvious effort, Uncle John continued his directions.

"Mrs. Parkes is to have the cottage rent free, and old Veal must not be turned out of his farm. I've left something to be divided among the servants, and pensioned off three. Tiptop is to live idle in the paddock for the rest of his days. Oh! write and tell Foster I arranged about enclosing the Osiers before I was ill. There's nothing else, I think. No; it's all off my mind now. I'm like a fellow who has got his portmanteau packed, and nothing to do but wait for the train. I say, I wonder where I shall be this time to-morrow?"

"In heaven!" blurted the General. "If *you're* not good enough, I don't know who is!"

"Good enough!" repeated the other. "If you

only knew, my dear old friend, how weak, how selfish, how ungrateful, how wicked I have often been! And yet I hope and I trust—and, somehow, I don't feel so much afraid. It's not so terrible as I thought. Thank you for coming, old friend! I can face it better with you to back me up. I hope it's not wrong, but I had rather have you with me at this moment than the Archbishop of Canterbury."

With an aching heart the General returned the pressure of the kind hand he held.

"Perhaps I shall see poor Harry," continued the weak voice, falling fainter and fainter as the controlling mind began to wander, drifting, as it were, from its moorings, with the ebb of an inevitable tide, "and Fitzjames, and dear little Bankes, who died when you got your promotion. I'll tell them we often talked about them down here. It's getting very dark. Don't go, Pike. They might tell Emily now. She'd be disappointed not to say good-bye. It's very late. I'm so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open. Have they sent the horses on? Good-night, Pike; good-night, everybody. I am to be called at daybreak! Don't be late, Pike. God bless you. Good-night."

Laura had already hastened to Mrs. Dennison's room and tapped at the door. Aunt Emily, who was trying in vain to sleep, hoping, to do her justice, that she might thus gain strength for many a future night-watch by her husband's bed, leapt to her feet in an instant, and hurried down to the death-chamber, scarcely noticing the messenger, mistaking her, indeed, in the dimly-lighted passage for one of her own servants.

Pike rose on her entrance and yielded her his place, for the hand he held had no pulsation in it now, and a finer ear than the General's could not

have detected whether or no respiration had wholly ceased, that the spirit, sublimed from its earthly covering, might return to God.

But Laura knew that her ministrations could be of no further use, and so with wet eyes and an aching heart, departed noiseless and unrecognised as she came.

Sadly, solemnly, in unutterable sorrow and unspoken prayer, the wife and the comrade watched by his senseless form who had been the kindest of husbands, and the best of friends.

Aunt Emily was persuaded that, although his eyes were fixed and dim, she had caught the last pressure of his hand; that when the grey light of morning, stealing through the window curtains, settled on the pale, fixed face, a farewell smile for *her* was lingering in the calm features of the dead.

Perhaps she was right. It would have been cruel to undeceive her if she was wrong.

So the dawn flushed and brightened, the day woke up, and fifty paces off, round the corner, a bird began to sing in the gardens of Guelph Square.

CHAPTER XXX

RESTORED

LAURA stole quietly into the street, and lifting her veil that she might drink in long deep breaths of the fresh morning air, paced slowly the deserted pavement, thinking of many things.

From Homer downwards (and what a long way it is to the bottom of the hill!) poets of every grade have sung the praises of rosy-fingered Aurora, as if she were indeed the goddess of good spirits, good humour, hope, happiness, and enjoyment! Now, to my mind, and, I think, on reflection, many late sitters-up and early risers will agree with me, the hour of dawn, as it is the coldest, seems also the most melancholy of the twenty-four. I am not alluding to those early stirrers who, long before the conclusion of their natural rest, are either unbreakfasted or have eaten a bad breakfast with little appetite; nor do I expect sympathy from that roysterer who, having supped heartily, not without champagne, at midnight, puts his fifth cigar in his mouth, and faces daybreak with undefeated cheerfulness, stalking home to a bed he has no intention of leaving till two o'clock in the afternoon. But I imagine that, insisting on the mournfulness of morning, I express the sentiments of most men and women who, watching, travelling, or keeping any other necessary vigil, have found themselves

compelled to see the sun rise when they would much rather have been fast asleep between closed curtains in a darkened room.

Desire, it has been said, springs from separation. Thus, I think, some of our strongest feelings are called forth by contrast. There is much deep and painful truth in the sentiment of Byron's beautiful lines—

> "But when I stood beneath the fresh green tree,
> Which living waves, where thou did'st cease to live,
> And saw around me the wide field revive
> With fruits and fertile promise, and the Spring
> Come forth her work of gladness to contrive,
> With all her reckless birds upon the wing,
> I turned from all she brought to those she could not bring."

So when the conscience is stained by guilt, is there not reproach in the pure, clear morning sky? So when the heart is heavy for grief, is there not a mockery in the bird with its morning carol, the breeze with its morning freshness, and earth herself with her smiling morning face? A man looks at the moon, and sighs for that which might be; but he turns away from the dawn, with a groan for that which can never be again!

There are rolling clouds about the car of Eos, goddess of Morning, but Mnemosyne, goddess of Memory, sits dim and indistinct among the vapours; dimmer and more indistinct that we are looking for her through a mist of tears.

Laura's eyes turned wistfully to the dappled clouds, rose-tinted with beams that, far below the lofty wall of houses, were already breaking in splinters of fire along the horizon, and wondered if ever again she would feel the dead weight lifted from her heart, find hope in the sunrise, happiness in the brightening day. The risk she had lately run seemed but to have fed her fierce longing,

sharpened her cruel hunger, to look in Lexley's face once more.

On just such a morning she remembered travelling with him, a week after their marriage, in an open carriage by themselves, among the Welsh mountains. She could see his kind eyes bent down to meet her own. She could hear his earnest voice repeating for the twentieth time the old fond tale.

"Dearest," it whispered, "I have been a happy and a prosperous man, but I never believed life had anything to offer equal to this! You have shown me that there is a heaven here on earth. God forbid I should ever have to learn the lesson it is my weekly duty to teach, that there is no unalloyed happiness on this side the grave!"

Had he learned the lesson now, she wondered, and how had he accepted it? Was the trial too severe? Had he endured it with the courage of a brave man, the resignation of a good one? Or had he broken down under the test, giving way, like many a weaker nature, to unavailing complaints, or sinking in a sullen, helpless despair? Oh no! she prayed not! She trusted not! And yet she did not quite wish him to bear it as well as she hoped!

And what was left for *her*? A loveless life of endless drudgery, of unavailing effort, of solitude, repining, and woe!

She saw herself going down into the future a middle-aged woman, with grey hair, whose comeliness had departed as the colour fades out of a flower in the dark, watching by the sick-beds of those who would consider gold, if not silver, an equivalent for offices and attentions that might tax the purest friendship, the sincerest love. She saw herself

sallying forth, morning after morning, to the uncongenial task, returning day after day from the irksome labour, wasting health and strength, devoting life and limb, and all for what?

The unaccustomed tears rose in her eyes, while an angel whispered at her heart—"It is for his sake!"

Yes, for his sake, to whom she had given the mature love of her womanhood, to whose honour she had willingly offered up her own happiness, learning in her cruel sacrifice the great lesson that teaches how earthly affection for the one, expanding into benevolence for the many, rises at last into noble adoration for the Maker and Protector of all.

"At least," she thought, "though it be but an atom in the great Scheme, this lonely, loveless life will not have been wasted, and if I am permitted to form a link, however trifling, in the great chain of brotherhood that makes the world happier, purer, better, it little matters what becomes of the poor unit Me. I can lift my eyes fearlessly to heaven, and say from a truthful heart—Thy will be done!"

The birds were singing merrily now, in full chorus, among the trees and bushes of Guelph Square. The morning sunshine was gilding chimneys and housetops. A fresh westerly breeze was wafting into London the many perfumes of Spring, and Laura, lifting her own fair face to meet the smile of morning, felt like the Ancient Mariner when he learned to pray, that a weight was taken off her heart.

The milkman had already begun his rounds. It was later than she thought, too late to go to bed now. She had not seen a bit of green for months; she would compass Guelph Square once, the walk

would do her good, and then, striking into one of the great eastern thoroughfares, make her way home.

Guelph Square looked very tempting, with its gardens bursting into that tender green foliage which is the most becoming garb of Spring. Laura made its circuit more than once, and emerging on her homeward thoroughfare, found the day so far advanced that she was glad to hail an early omnibus, lumbering along, empty and solitary, towards the City.

Lowering her veil, she passed through to take her seat at the far end, under an advertisement of some unknown article, spelt with all the consonants in the alphabet.

The pace of an omnibus is, in my opinion, most distressing to inside passengers; alternating, as it does, between a lumber and a jolt. The annoyance, too, of continual stoppages to take up and set down fares, is enhanced for persons of irritable disposition by the inscrutable conduct of that functionary on the step, who seems always about to perform some acrobatic feat or practical joke, which, provokingly, never comes off. When empty, there is something inexpressibly depressing in the contemplation of its dirty floor-cloth and stuffy plush cushions; when full, as that became in which Laura was seated, long before she had done with it, there seems united in this ingenious contrivance the *maximum* of discomfort with the *minimum* of despatch. It is difficult to say whether you suffer most from your next neighbours' elbows or your opposite neighbour's knees, till pulled up with a jerk that jumbles you all into a promiscuous heap, you decide there is little to choose between any of the angular articulations that provide flexibility for the human frame.

Your eyes, too, are subject to a like constraint with your limbs. If they meet the conductor's, he immediately insists on stopping to set you down. If you glance to right or left, those on each side place their hands in a position to protect their pockets; if you look across, the lady opposite lowers her veil with an austere frown, or, more alarming still, responds with a bold stare and a smile! Discomfited and ashamed, you take refuge at last in the contemplation of a pair of worn black gloves, an umbrella, and a basket.

Desirable as may be the interior of this ark for a refuge in bad weather, I confess that on a fine morning I much prefer the outside. So did Lexley.

He, too, had been at the house in Guelph Street, and learned the sad tidings of Uncle John's decease. Having called the previous evening, he received from the servants so alarming an account of Mr. Dennison's state that the image of his kind friend lying on a bed of death haunted him through the night. He could not rest in uncertainty, and rose therefore with early morning, to obtain fresh intelligence and learn the truth. Thus it fell out that he arrived at the door in Guelph Street not many minutes after Laura had left it; thus it fell out that mounting the very omnibus in which she was returning to the City, he sat on its roof, with the heel of his boot not many inches removed from the fair face he still worshipped so fondly, so devotedly, but that he never hoped to see in this world again!

In this world? No. To such sad conclusion he seemed at last reconciled. The revulsion of feeling that succeeded his discovery of the real truth in Middleton Gaol, had been almost as dangerous to reason as that first crushing blow which so prostrated him, when his judgment told him, though his heart

would not believe it, that the woman he loved was an object of scorn, fallen too low to be even worth contempt. We have seen how a powerful nature and a well-balanced mind carried him through both trials, and we also know that the disappointment of seeking her in vain through crowded London, was in proportion to the unreasonable exultation he had experienced when he learned that not only Laura might still be his own, but that she had proved herself worthy, and more than worthy, of the place he gave her in his home and heart. Had it not been so, would she have had that place still? His was a mind that never shrank from self-examination, and it had solved that question once for all. The home? No. The heart? Yes. He loved her as only such men *can* love, and though the shrine had been ever so polluted, the image ever so defaced, the incense he had burned in the temple still hung about its ruins, the spot where he had knelt, were it even in the ignorance of idolatry, was still and always must be a border of holy ground.

But when days wore to weeks and months, yet brought no tidings, it is small wonder that hope gave way. He could not quite realise to himself that *she* had no means of verifying Delancy's death, and that the same noble sentiment which caused her to leave home would still keep her concealed from his loving search. He thought she must be dead, that she must have passed away under a false name to an unknown grave, but even from this desponding conclusion the sting was taken out by his belief that she had only gone on to where he would follow in due time; that if she might never walk by his side a wife in the sight of man, he could fold her in his heart a wife in the sight of God.

Mourning her, as he meant to do all his life, this

was why he had yesterday resisted Annie's entreaties to attend the wedding-breakfast; this was why, sitting on the roof of the omnibus in the bright spring sunshine, he was thinking of her now.

There is something in the sky that suggests to the rudest of us, we know not why, a vague yearning for the unknown, a vague perception of the infinite, a vague consciousness of immortality. Turning his face to heaven, Lexley felt, surely as if an angel had told him, that he would see his love again.

He little dreamed how soon.

At the next turning but one, he bade the driver set him down. At the very next turning the omnibus stopped for a lady thickly veiled and dressed in black to get out.

Lexley, looking at the sky, would not have noticed her, but that while paying her fare she dropped a shilling in the mud, and before she could pick it up, the conductor, moved no doubt by the favourable appearance of his passenger, stooped nimbly down to recover and restore the coin.

"Thank you!" said Laura, nothing more. But Lexley, starting as if he was shot, jumped from the roof in two bounds, flung the conductor half a crown, and, without waiting for change, strode after the retreating figure of the lady in black as fast as his long legs would carry him.

"Bill, did ye see *that*?" said the last-named functionary to his coadjutor on the box, biting at the same time the half-crown he had caught with much dexterity to satisfy himself it was genuine, and winking freely, while the vehicle rolled on.

Subsequently, over a pint of beer, he expressed his opinion at greater length on the whole proceeding. I regret to say it was by no means flattering to the morals of the Established Church.

Turning down the bye-street that led to her home, Laura was aware of hasty footsteps following in pursuit. Looking back, she found herself face to face with her husband.

Yes, surely he *was* her husband, or else when the pavement seemed turning round, and she held by the area-railings lest she should fall, why was the kind voice in her ear, the strong arm round her waist, the loving eyes that haunted her dreams looking fondly, frankly, fearlessly into her own?

They did not rush into each other's embrace with tears and sobs and foolish gestures. How could they, with a policeman and a pot-boy looking on? But they walked soberly away arm-in-arm, and Lexley must have told her in a few words much that has been here narrated of their strange vicissitudes, to account for the following observation—

"Then it has all to be done over again; darling, how delightful! And, Algy! you haven't moved one of the rose-trees from under my window at home!"

The roses are still blooming, fresher and fairer than ever, on the lawn before the Parsonage. Mrs. Lexley tends them, no doubt, with exceeding care, but there is a little rosebud upstairs, not in a vase of water, but in a thing of twilling and bows and laces called a *berceaunette*; that, being the first blossom of her graft, takes up a great deal of her time. This prodigy is called Laura, and Lexley firmly believes she will grow up to a piece of unrivalled perfection like her mother, a queen of women, as the Rose is Queen of Flowers.

He sees them both in the light of a love that has been tried in the furnace, to come out purer, brighter, and more precious than refined gold.

I have culled the motto that heads these chapters from an ancient volume, containing, perhaps, more

of the stuff out of which romance and fiction are fabricated than any other book in the world. As a cook selects for the stock from which to make her soup, good wholesome beef, rich, succulent, and close in fibre, such as will bear the cut-and-come-again of the carving knife, so from the *Morte d' Arthur*, many of our greatest authors have compounded savoury dishes on which our intellects delight to feed; one of our greatest poets has drawn again and again the strength and savour which renders the banquet he has provided an imperishable feast for gods and men.

Lavish of incident, if somewhat wordy in narrative, grand in conception, if a little tiresome in detail, noble in sentiment, even when most exaggerated in expression, this old-world history seems an exponent of all that Gothic fire and hardihood which Christian faith moulded into chivalry. Anything finer and more impracticable than the aspirations of King Arthur in his institution of the Round Table, is not to be found in literature. That "monarch bold" has been for after ages the type of all that, in its highest, purest, noblest sense, constitutes The Gentleman. In his glorious scheme of banding together a Brotherhood, united in enterprise, loyalty, and devotion, for whom no tasks should be too arduous, no adventures too full of danger, are found the germs of every effort that has since been made to instruct and benefit mankind, from the shaven Jesuit crucified in China to the frozen mariner stiff and stark on an iceberg with his face to the North Pole. The character of Arthur, upright, generous, unselfish, incapable of suspicion, as of fear, is the ideal of all we most revere and love. His history, and that of his knights, may be considered as a parable, teaching

men to what lofty aims they ought to soar, teaching them also to what profound depths of sin and sorrow they are prone to sink. Yes, Launcelot and Tristram stand forth, one on each side of "the selfless, stainless king," gigantic figures, moulded in heroic proportions, to afford warning even as they compel admiration, fallen because of the very qualities that raised them above their fellows, dishonoured in regard to that very honour by which they set such priceless store. Alas for truth, when Tristram could deceive! Alas for loyalty, when Launcelot rode under shield against his lord! Alas for the lower, weaker natures, whom these great hearts drew down in their disgrace! Alas for the girdle of steel that, but for base alloy, was to have compassed the earth! Alas for the flowers of chivalry, that

"The trail of the serpent was over them all!"

Yet what a garland it was once! In the noble time before that fatal morning when Guinevere and the court went a-maying,

"Green-suited, and in plumes that mocked the May."

When, year by year, as Pentecost came round, the sovereign and brother-in-arms gathered his knights about him to reward their exploits, hear their adventures, take counsel of their experience, inciting them by precept and example to greater efforts and higher aims. When the tournament glittered by day, and the winecup blushed at night; when trumpets pealed and minstrels sang; when knights encountered in the saddle, frankly as they pledged each other at the board; when the goblet was emptied to the dregs, the lance shivered to the grasp, while through the mimic war, the mirthful revelry, through the tramp of horses, the din of

feasts, the rustle of silk, the clang of steel, and the whispers of peerless dames, whose bright eyes travelled over all, there still predominated the one paramount rule of Courtesy, which seemed indeed the very essence and origin of the whole.

And in what consisted this Courtesy, this Gentleness, which every knight assumed, indigenous to and inseparable from his very knighthood? Was it not courage, that feared no earthly evil but shame? Humility, that, doing its best and bravest, set its comrade's achievements ever before its own? Last at the feast, first in the fray, yielding the place of honour to all, the post of danger to none? Faith, believing frankly in its brother, trusting humbly in its God? Hope, aiming at its highest standard? Charity, stooping to the lowest need? Was it not indeed an effort after that pure and holy unselfishness which centuries earlier had walked the earth barefoot, though, being human, the imitation was therefore imperfect and fallible, while compelled by the needs of the Middle Ages to ride in steel?

Nobody can read the *Morte d'Arthur* without observing the extraordinary discrepancy that exists between the sentiments it inculcates and the conduct of those whose doings in love and war it records, approvingly and without the slightest reproach. This I attribute less to the morals than the manners of the age for which it was composed. The writer, in common with his readers, had learned none of those tricks of rhetoric in which modern authors, while they insist strenuously on the fact, veil the shocking declaration that "we are all naked under our clothes," and, doubtless, on occasion, he calls a spade a spade, with a freedom against which we cannot too strongly protest. These are mere questions of detail, in no way affecting its main

object, and but slightly detracting from the sterling merits of the work. What I insist on is the sentiment that pervades the whole, the high standard which a gentle knight was ever striving to attain, that combination of courage and meekness of the soldier with the Christian, which forms, if not the most admirable, certainly the most amiable, and perhaps not the least useful character humanity can adopt.

They gave and took hard knocks, these grand old knights, but it was rather to redress wrongs than, as the quaint black-letter English expresses it, to "win worship." And though they fought like devils, they prayed like saints behind their visors all the time. A good steed, a stout arm, and a long sword constituted but a part of the warlike outfit they deemed incomplete without a pious, trustful heart. Calling on God to help them, they went resolutely into battle against any odds, and in all the affairs of life believed and acted up to their belief, that heaven was on his side who struggled manfully for the right.

One of these grim old champions has embodied in two lines a comprehensive creed to carry men triumphantly through the most perilous enterprises, as to guide them safely over the shoals and quicksands of common life.

He will fail in few of his undertakings, nor will his heart sink under the bitterest reverses, who can say with stout King Pellinore—

> Me forthinketh, this shall betide, but
> God may well foredoe destiny.

THE END

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